

## Area E — Women and armed conflict: participation and protection in the EU

### Introduction

The Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) underlined the importance of women's participation in conflict resolution and the promotion of lasting peace. It also recognised that women have the right to protection, as they are at particular risk of being targeted by violence in conflict, such as conflict-related sexual violence and forced displacement. These themes were later incorporated in the United Nations Security Council resolutions on women, peace and security (e.g. Resolutions 1325 and 1820), which constitute the foundation of the EU's policy framework in addressing Area E of the BPfA.

A number of EU policies acknowledge the importance of women's participation in EU security and defence activities. The newly adopted strategic approach to women, peace and security reinforces the importance of women's participation in all EU external action, while the 2016 EU global strategy recognises the need to promote women's participation in peace efforts, including among EU personnel. Similarly, the gender action plan 2016-2020 reiterates the need to strengthen women's participation in policy and governance

processes at all levels. However, progress has been slow in the actual participation of women in the EU's own security and defence efforts.

A central issue facing the EU concerns the protection of asylum seekers, many of whom are displaced by armed conflict. While there are greater numbers of men seeking asylum, women experience particular challenges compared with men, related to stress and trauma, health complications (particularly for pregnant women), injury, and the risk of exploitation and violence. An important development is the 2013 EU Directive on International Protection, which recognises the need for asylum processes that take into account these differences in needs of asylum seekers. The EU is also taking steps to ratify the Istanbul Convention, which requires that gender-based persecution, such as sexual violence against women, be recognised as a ground for asylum. In practice, however, not all national asylum processes can consider differences in the situations and needs of women and men among the asylum-seeking population.



## Low participation of women in security and defence at EU and Member State levels

The EU and the Member States need to ensure equal representation within their own institutions in order to improve the credibility of their efforts to bolster women's participation in local peace processes. Unfortunately, progress is slow. Between 2013 and 2015, women headed 22 % of Member States' diplomatic missions, a proportion almost unchanged compared with 2010-2012 (21 %), but up slightly on 2008-2010 (18 %). Positive examples from some countries demonstrate the importance of adopting specific plans. In Finland, for example, women now account for 46 % of heads of missions and two thirds of staff newly recruited to the diplomatic services, increasing their overall representation to around 50 %.

In the European External Action Service (EEAS, the EU's diplomatic service), women held 28 % of management positions

in 2019 and led one in four delegations. While women continue to be under-represented, these numbers are an increase from 2013, when women held 21 % of management positions and headed 19 % of delegations. Ten civilian common security and defence policy missions were active in 2016; half of them were headed by women and the proportion of women deployed in such missions rose from 20 % to just over 29 % between 2007 and 2016. The EU does not systematically publish information that will help to determine recent trends in women's participation in military and police CSDP operations. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute indicates that the proportion of women in the military personnel varied between 5.3 % and 8.4 % between 2013 and 2017.

## Asylum-seeking women face challenges that national asylum processes often do not (fully) address

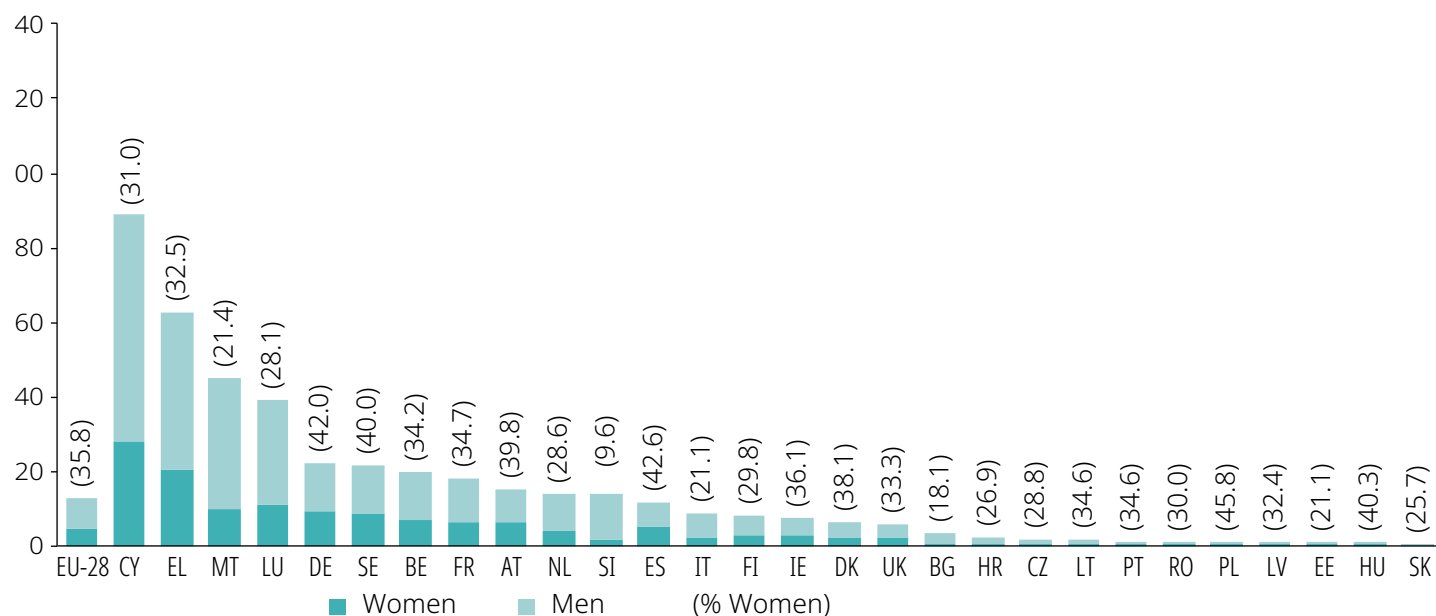
The number of asylum applications in EU countries peaked at 1.3 million in 2015. Although this had halved by 2018, it nevertheless remains much higher than in 2013. The proportion of women applicants (including girls) is lower than the proportion of men (including boys) (Figure 1) and varies by age, with more women in the youngest and oldest age groups.

Experiences of the asylum process vary by gender. For example, women may face different challenges from those of men in accessing asylum, including difficulties with travelling (for financial or cultural reasons), the presence of family members during the asylum process (including children, where childcare facilities are not provided) and opportunities to express trauma or shame. Women and girls on the move are at a grave risk of being subjected to sexual violence throughout

their journeys; for example, some national studies found that as many as 60 % of separated migrant girl children are victims of sexual or other form of violence.

National asylum processes vary significantly in the protection they afford asylum-seeking women. Positive steps have been taken in some Member States to improve protection for women, such as providing services for vulnerable groups, including post-natal planning and physiotherapy for pregnant women, psychoeducation courses for single women and support for lone parents to enrol their children in school. By contrast, other Member States do not ensure that standardised procedures are in place to recognise vulnerable asylum seekers.

Figure 1. Asylum applications per 10 000 population by gender of applicant, EU-28, 2018



Source: Eurostat, asylum statistics (migr\_asyappctza)

## Recommendations for action

To credibly support women's participation in conflict areas, the EU and its Member States are recommended to improve the representation of women in the EU's own security and defence institutions. To this end, it would be beneficial for Member States to develop detailed plans to reduce gaps in representation across their diplomatic services, particularly considering that women remain under-represented in key decision-making positions. It is advisable that such plans become part of national/EU gender equality strategies and action plans to ensure their efficient implementation and monitoring.

The EEAS could consider adopting a strategy similar to the United Nations Secretary-General's United for Gender Parity policy to coordinate and monitor continued progress. This includes enhanced cooperation between the EEAS and Member States to achieve existing targets for women's improved participation in the civilian, police and military components of CSDP missions and operations. Regular collection

and publishing of sex-disaggregated data on participation in such missions and operations is crucial to track progress.

Beyond the issues of women's representation, it is crucial to promote more harmonised efforts in Member States to achieve the minimum expected standards for gender sensitivity within the asylum sector. It is particularly important to improve the gender sensitivity of the treatment of asylum seekers at border agencies, reception centres and health services. A range of measures would help achieve this, including adequate training of officials to appropriately evaluate and support both women and men asylum seekers; ensuring sufficient representation of both women and men among personnel; and providing multidisciplinary support services (e.g. gynaecologists, midwives, psychologists and interpreters) to ensure that women asylum seekers can access appropriate and necessary support. Finally, the ratification of the Istanbul Convention by the EU and all Member States would guarantee that gender-based violence is explicitly recognised as a grounds for asylum.

## Further information

The EU faces a number of additional challenges in relation to women and armed conflict (Area E). It must continue to move from words to action and ensure that gender continues to be mainstreamed within the security and defence agenda, that effective means are in place to tackle violence in conflict and fragile contexts, and that the training and expertise of personnel within this sector are sufficiently gender sensitive. Tracking progress is complicated by the lack of good-quality, comprehensive EU-wide monitoring data: a central challenge in this area.

Further information on EU policy developments and trends in the area of women and armed conflict can be found in EIGE's Beijing + 25 report. Some other policy briefs based on this report also present challenges that are closely related to women and armed conflict (such as Area D, Violence against women, Area G, Women in power and decision-making, Area I, Human rights of women, and Area L, The girl child).

EIGE regularly produces reports reviewing different areas of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) or other EU policy priorities, as requested by the presidencies of the Council of the European Union. This factsheet is based on the report *Beijing + 25: The fifth review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in the EU Member States*, prepared at the request of Finland's Presidency of the Council of the EU.

Other publications include:

- [Tackling the Gender Pay Gap: Not without a better work–life balance](#) (2019)
- [Gender Equality and Youth: Opportunities and risks of digitalisation](#) (2019)
- [Women and Men in ICT: A chance for better work–life balance](#) (2018)
- [Study and Work in the EU: Set apart by gender](#) (2018)

You can explore all of EIGE's previous BPfA reports and publications at <https://eige.europa.eu/beijing-platform-for-action>

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European Institute for Gender Equality  
Gedimino pr. 16  
LT-01103 Vilnius  
Lithuania

### Contact details

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+370 52157444 



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