



THE IMAGE AND THE PERCEPTION: GENDER-RESPONSIVE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS IN EU CIVILIAN CSDP MISSIONS

GRETCHEN BALDWIN*

INTRODUCTION

The European Union (EU) is doubling down on its efforts to strengthen the civilian dimension of its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and increase the effectiveness of its civilian crisis management missions. To this end, EU member states agreed on a new Civilian CSDP Compact in May 2023, comprising 14 strategic guidelines and 20 political commitments, as well as a list of deliverables and timelines. Two thematic areas that received stronger attention compared to the previous compact are gender equality and strategic communications. Yet in civilian CSDP missions, overlap between these areas—which come together as ‘gender-responsive strategic communications’—remains limited. This is a missed opportunity, because gender-responsive strategic communications have the potential to improve not only gender parity efforts, but also the implementation of wider commitments related to the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda, such as mainstreaming gender perspectives in the planning, implementation and evaluation of missions and promoting gender-responsive leadership.¹

Despite the potential for positive impact, there has only been limited research on the overlap between gender expertise and communications in peace operations and crisis management missions. This SIPRI Policy Brief explores the opportunities and challenges of gender-responsive strategic communications in the context of EU civilian CSDP missions.² Based on an analysis of relevant literature and policies, 16 interviews with gender advisers and press and public information officers (PPIOs) in civilian CSDP missions, and a focus group with 6 gender advisers, this brief presents the concept of gender-responsive strategic communications and makes the case

¹ Council of the European Union (EU), Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on the establishment of a Civilian CSDP Compact, 9588/23, 22 May 2023; European External Action Service (EEAS), Strategy and Action Plan to Enhance Women’s Participation in Civilian CSDP Missions 2021–2024, 12 Dec. 2021; and Council of the EU, ‘A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence’, 7371/22, 21 Mar. 2022.

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SUMMARY

● The European Union (EU) is doubling down on its efforts to strengthen the civilian dimensions of its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and increase the effectiveness of its civilian crisis management missions. Two thematic areas that receive stronger attention in the newly updated Civilian CSDP Compact from May 2023 are gender equality and strategic communications. Yet in civilian CSDP missions, overlap between these areas—which come together as ‘gender-responsive strategic communications’—remains limited.

There has also only been limited research on the overlap between gender expertise and communications in peace operations and crisis management missions. This SIPRI Policy Brief explores the opportunities and challenges of gender-responsive strategic communications in the context of EU civilian CSDP missions. It provides six recommendations which align with ongoing processes towards improving capability development, gender parity, counter-foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), and training. The recommendations address formal guidance, accountability mechanisms, contextual awareness in missions, men in gender work, women’s participation and gendered FIMI threats.



for its wider use in civilian CSDP missions, identifying related best practices and key challenges.³

The policy brief concludes with recommendations on ways to improve collaboration between gender and communications expertise in civilian CSDP missions and to ensure that strategic communications by and on these missions are gender responsive. Reflecting the cross-cutting nature of these issues, the findings and recommendations of this brief are aimed at actors from the EU headquarters, missions and member states alike. Importantly, their relevance extends beyond WPS and strategic communications, touching also on other priority areas of the Civilian CSDP Compact such as capability development, human resources management, leadership, training and countering foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI).

GENDER-RESPONSIVE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

Strategic communications generally refer to purposeful communications used by an organization explicitly to fulfil that organization's mission. Given that different interpretations exist in different EU sections and missions, this policy brief works from this broad definition. Gender-responsive strategic communications refer broadly to communications aiming to fulfil an institutional goal that is informed by gender analysis or to mainstream a gender perspective, whether it is explicitly about gender or not. Thus, it is about 'being conscious of both the image [projected by the mission] and the perception [by the target audience]'.⁴

The communications efforts of peace operations or crisis management missions should be grounded in their mandated objectives, including commitments related to gender mainstreaming, women's participation and the WPS agenda, and are inextricably woven into their overarching political objectives.⁵ Communications are both internal and external, as well as formal and informal. Gender-responsive strategic communications, when done well, strengthen institutional culture and commitments and create transparency.⁶ They have numerous positive effects, including 'contributing to changing gender norms, addressing certain issues related to gender-based violence (GBV), and promoting women's participation'.⁷ Longer or more intense exposure to such interventions can lead to more sustainable changes and disruption of harmful gender stereotypes.⁸

In EU civilian CSDP missions, gender-related commitments and guidance for 'all planning, implementation, and evaluation' include: (a) gender parity goals; (b) implementation of the WPS agenda; (c) promoting gender equality, especially women's full and meaningful participation; (d) mainstreaming a

³ Collectively, the interviewees represent current and previous experience in the following civilian Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) mission contexts: Afghanistan, Armenia, Central African Republic, Georgia, Iraq, Kosovo, Libya, Mali, Moldova, Niger, Palestine, Somalia and Ukraine. The interviews were held with 11 gender advisers and 5 press and public information officers (PPIOs); 2 of the gender advisers were also 'double-hatted' as human rights advisers at the time of interview.

⁴ Gender adviser no. 7, EU civilian CSDP mission, Interview with author, virtual, 1 July 2024.

⁵ Sherman, J. and Trithart, A., 'Strategic communications in UN peace operations: From an afterthought to an operational necessity', International Peace Institute (IPI) Issue Brief, 19 Aug 2021, p. 13.

⁶ European Institute for Gender Equality, 'Institutional transformation: Gender mainstreaming toolkit' 2016, p. 28.

⁷ Birchall, J., 'Gender sensitive strategic communications interventions', 6 Dec 2018.

⁸ Birchall (note 7), p. 12.



gender perspective; (e) utilizing a gender analysis; and (f) ‘tackling gender inequalities and gender-based violence’.⁹ Likewise, the EU’s Strategic Compass for Security and Defence from 2022 calls to improve and intensify CSDP missions’ strategic communication tools and capabilities. Despite commitments to gender spanning all mission strategies and operational activities, only one policy document thus far—the Strategy and Action Plan to Enhance Women’s Participation in Civilian CSDP Missions (which is due to be updated in 2024)—notes an explicit connection between strategic communications and gender equality. In its ‘strategic engagement area 4’, the Strategy and Action Plan highlights ‘strategic communication and networking’ as a key area for increasing women’s participation in civilian CSDP missions.¹⁰

The most common understanding of gender-responsive communications involves communication of explicitly gender-related policies or activities, such as gender parity goals, GBV awareness and response, or International Women’s Day programming. But the information being communicated need not be *about* gender to be gender responsive. The efficacy of general communication can also be improved when a gender lens is applied (e.g. identifying gendered gaps in host communities’ media consumption or access).¹¹ Yet this can be difficult to implement, as ‘gender’ is often understood by non-experts to refer only (or primarily) to women’s representation.

Communications by civilian CSDP missions

Strategic communication has increasingly been recognized as a pivotal component of the ‘soft power’ tools of peace operations and crisis management.¹² In the case of EU civilian CSDP, the term is a bit fraught; some missions’ press and public information (PPI) sections—usually staffed by two to three people—say what they do includes strategic communication, others say it does not.¹³ Broadly speaking, PPIOs are engaged in certain aspects of strategic communications but are not equipped or mandated to be full-spectrum strategic communication actors. For many missions, external communications are the priority, but some do not run public campaigns at all due to sensitivities around their presence and activities.¹⁴ From the European External Action Service (EEAS) in Brussels to member states and down to mission level, different entities seem to sometimes talk past each other with regard to strategic communications. There is not always a clear distinction between public diplomacy and strategic communications. For some mission personnel, strategic communication objectives are primarily about countering FIMI, while for others, they are more broadly about communicating institutional objectives towards a common goal.

Some guidance from the EEAS and the Civilian Planning and Conduct Capability (CPCC)—the Brussels-based operational headquarters of all civil-

⁹ Council of the EU, 9588/23 (note 1); EEAS (note 1); and Council of the EU, 7371/22 (note 1).

¹⁰ EEAS (note 1).

¹¹ Birchall (note 7).

¹² Birnback, N., ‘Under the blue flag: Leadership and strategic communications in UN peace operations’, Folke Bernadotte Academy, Policy Brief no. 2019:4, 1 Apr. 2019.

¹³ PPIO no. 3, EU civilian CSDP mission, Written correspondence with author, 27 May 2024; PPIO no. 4, EU civilian CSDP mission, Interview with author, virtual, 17 July 2024; and PPIO no. 5, EU civilian CSDP mission, Interview with author, virtual, 17 July 2024.

¹⁴ PPIO no. 3 (note 13).



ian CSDP missions—explicitly refers to general communication activities towards a particular goal for a specific audience as strategic communications (e.g. communication to member states or seconding agencies about women’s representation targets in the Strategy and Action Plan or public press releases about mission-level initiatives). Communication priorities, while dependent on the target audience—which includes host governments or partner security institutions, host country communities and civil society, member states and seconding agencies, other international actors, and mission personnel—tend to centre on certain key areas: (a) increasing visibility and understanding of the mission through social media, press releases, websites and other tools; (b) liaising with and coordinating visits for national and international media; (c) public relations; (d) measuring impact and monitoring responses to mission output; (e) coordinating messaging with other EU offices and international actors; (f) communicating representation targets to seconding agencies and member states; and (g) ad hoc activities.¹⁵ The complexity of operational environments and recent, dramatic changes in the ways global communications are carried out, as well as mission mandate limitations, all play a role in the effectiveness of communications.¹⁶

Gender expertise in civilian CSDP missions

Gender expertise in civilian CSDP missions is primarily led by gender advisers and supported by networks of gender focal points across different mission sections. Gender advisers coordinate the gender mainstreaming and gender equality work in the mission; like their PPI counterparts, many of their priorities are context dependent. However, where PPI activities are largely external facing, gender advisers balance both internal and external responsibilities. Guidance from the EEAS and the CPCC on gender-related priorities has grown significantly over the last six years, and they are working to catch up with other multilateral organizations.¹⁷

Depending on mission contexts and mandates, gender advisers’ activities include: (a) training sessions for mission personnel on subjects such as sexual exploitation and abuse, harassment, and unconscious bias; (b) induction training sessions on gender mainstreaming and the WPS agenda; (c) training sessions for national partners on topics such as the Istanbul Convention; (d) activities around International Women’s Day and the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence; (e) working with human resources on recruitment and work environment issues; (f) coordinating with civil society organizations in the field; (g) working with national partner institutions, for example, organizing workshops and training sessions, assisting them in developing gender action plans and consulting on national law drafting; (h) developing and updating missions’ gender action plans; (i) conducting internal assessments of barriers to women’s participation; (j) advising

¹⁵ PPIO no. 1, EU civilian CSDP mission, Interview with author, virtual, 31 May 2024; PPIO no. 2, EU civilian CSDP mission, Interview with author, virtual, 3 June 2024; PPIO no. 3 (note 13); PPIO no. 4 (note 13); and PPIO no. 5 (note 13).

¹⁶ Sherman and Trithart (note 5).

¹⁷ Smit, T., ‘Delivering the compact: Towards a more capable and gender-balanced EU civilian CSDP’, SIPRI Research Policy Paper, Nov 2022; and EEAS, ‘Report on the Baseline Study on Integrating Human Rights and Gender into the European Union’s Common Security and Defence Policy’, EEAS(2016)990, 10 Nov. 2016.



mission leadership at a strategic level; and (k) other ad hoc activities.¹⁸ Gender mainstreaming is expected in all missions, so while specialized expertise and gender-specific activities are essential, gender responsiveness is relevant to *all* aspects of the work, including all communications.

Gender-responsive strategic communications in civilian CSDP missions

Strategic communications can play a significant role in mainstreaming gender across mission activities by communicating policies to member states and EU personnel, as well as mission mandates and values to external audiences (host governments and communities, in particular), and challenging gender stereotypes or norms embedded in the EU itself. As noted above, definitions of the precise types of communication occurring within civilian CSDP missions differ. While the PPIOs interviewed sometimes had conflicting perspectives on whether or not they were tasked with ‘doing strategic communications’, gender advisers typically used the term readily, although one noted that ‘[the PPI section] always talks about strategic communications, but no one has told me what it means’.¹⁹ This sentiment of uncertainty was echoed by others, saying there is not always a common understanding of the nuances required, particularly in delivering on gender-related mandated tasks.

Similarly, the gender advisers noted that, while generally their colleagues at the working level were well sensitized to the importance of ‘gender’, there is often a superficial understanding—at best—of what it actually means among non-experts.²⁰ Several highlighted that communications lack the deeper gender analysis called for in the Civilian CSDP Compact, often sharing messages no more complex than ‘women are important’ rather than, for example, exploring the actual issues faced by women and girls or interrogating innate ‘macho’ attitudes pervasive in security infrastructure.²¹ Additionally—in line with a common issue facing UN peace operations—non-expert colleagues often ‘think gender is only about quotas’.²² Given that there is no overarching guidance for gender-responsive strategic communications, conceptual clashes are difficult to overcome.

The UN Department of Peace Operations has struggled with a similar gap, but in recent years has taken steps to address it. For example, its Strategic Communications and Public Information Policy and its deployment of strategic communications expertise to peacekeeping missions provide systemwide guidance on communications but do not make the connection with UN gender mainstreaming goals. The May 2024 update of its Gender Responsive Peacekeeping Operations Policy, however, moves to address that gap with guidance for gender-responsive strategic communications.²³

Perhaps following this example, formalized guidance from the CPCC would help to address some of the conceptual gaps experienced in missions. While

¹⁸ Compiled from all 11 gender adviser interviews between May and July 2024.

¹⁹ Gender adviser no. 1, EU civilian CSDP mission, Interview with author, virtual, 31 May 2024.

²⁰ Gender adviser no. 1 (note 19); Gender adviser no. 2, EU civilian CSDP mission, Interview with author, virtual, 4 June 2024; Gender adviser no. 7 (note 4); and Gender adviser no. 10, EU civilian CSDP mission, Interview with author, virtual, 10 July 2024.

²¹ Gender adviser no. 1 (note 19).

²² Gender adviser no. 1 (note 19).

²³ Sherman and Trithart (note 5), pp. 3–5; and United Nations Department of Peace Operations, ‘Gender-responsive United Nations peacekeeping operations’, 1 May 2024, p. VII (Annex).



policies and guidance have limitations, issues like consistent style, ‘knowing what terms can or cannot be used in certain environments’, and suggestions for gender mainstreaming and audience analysis can be addressed while still leaving flexibility for specific mission and cultural contexts.²⁴

BEST PRACTICES

Interviewees agreed that the current coordination between gender advisers and PPIOs is strong, albeit personality dependent. Gender advisers and PPIOs alike bring best practices and lessons learned from their previous experience (e.g. in other CSDP missions, UN operations, journalism or law) into their work. The many best practices identified in interviews with both gender advisers and PPIOs can be categorized into four main areas: consistency, trust, knowledge and advance planning.

Consistency

All interviewees mentioned International Women’s Day (8 March annually) and the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence (in November and December annually) as built-in, flashpoint opportunities for collaboration between PPIOs and gender advisers, for which they receive unified messaging guidance from the CPCC. However, gender advisers in particular emphasized that this alone does not guarantee gender-responsive communications at all times. Consistent engagement between gender advisers and PPIOs ensures both that gender adviser activities are in line with WPS agenda implementation goals and that gender advisers can give input on general communications to improve gender mainstreaming across activities. It also ensures a coherent message, with all colleagues ‘speaking with one voice’.²⁵

Multiple interviewees emphasized the value of consistency in collaboration between thematic experts, such as gender advisers and PPIOs. In one mission, the PPI section receives input from field offices on ‘activities [the field offices] think are good to go out as strategic communications’ every Thursday.²⁶ In another, the PPI section and gender adviser have an ‘every-six-weeks deal’ through which a gender-related story is planned ahead and published at least every six weeks.²⁷ At least one mission’s internal gender strategy prioritizes ‘increasing communication about gender both internally and externally’; having this goal on paper together with a strong relationship between the current gender adviser and PPIO has enabled better and more consistent collaboration towards gender-responsive communications.²⁸

Advance planning

Advance planning empowers consistency; when planning for large-scale activities around International Women’s Day, for example, gathering gender advisers, PPIOs, gender focal points and other key personnel in advance to

²⁴ Sherman and Trithart (note 5), pp. 3–5.

²⁵ PPIO no. 4 (note 13).

²⁶ PPIO no. 2 (note 15).

²⁷ Gender adviser no. 9, EU civilian CSDP mission, Interview with author, virtual, 9 July 2024.

²⁸ Gender adviser no. 5, EU civilian CSDP mission, Interview with author, virtual, 28 June 2024.



understand priorities, goals and individual responsibilities typically leads to much greater success than coordinating last minute or, worse, when the activity is over.²⁹ Planning gender-responsive communications does not have to be complex, and the more consistent collaboration is, the easier planning becomes. Thinking ahead to how mission activities affect local populations can also have positive implications for communication strategies. As one interviewee said: ‘If we only focus on security forces but normal people on the streets don’t have a clue, then it doesn’t change anything. If you train officers to welcome victims, but the victims need to know that the resource is available to them.’³⁰ Positive examples of well-planned collaboration include a joint PPIO, gender adviser and national partners campaign against domestic violence in Iraq, as well as public awareness campaigns about legislation or treaties, such as the Istanbul Convention.³¹

Trust

Clear instructions and goals, open communication, informal friendships between gender advisers and PPIOs, and bilateral cooperation are best practices across missions. In cases where gender advisers or PPIOs have worked with members of senior management in previous deployments and have good working relationships, there tends to be more trust and less micromanagement, meaning more time for creative, working-level collaboration.³² These relationships can grow informally from something as simple as PPIOs and gender advisers having offices near each other, but also result from longer-term relationships and concerted efforts.

Knowledge

Even with the best intentions, gender advisers rarely have communications experience and PPIOs rarely have gender expertise, although there are exceptions. To bridge that knowledge gap, there are a number of practices that personnel have instituted. In some cases, missions have gender focal points in the PPI section, but they are volunteers, so it can be difficult to institutionalize this long term. Several interviewees shared that their missions have gender-neutral language guides for communication (e.g. replacing ‘policeman’ with ‘police officer’), which have been very effective and lasted through personnel rotations. Other missions have gender action plans that address communications and communication plans that are gender mainstreamed; this helps with knowledge management, ensuring that incoming personnel build on the lessons and achievements of their predecessors. Gender focal points can be trained in (or at least sensitized to) gender-responsive communications, and then report regularly to the PPI section. Some missions have PPIOs with a background or specific interest in gender

²⁹ Gender adviser no. 10 (note 20).

³⁰ Gender adviser no. 11, EU civilian CSDP mission, Interview with author, virtual, 12 July 2024.

³¹ PPIO no. 1 (note 15); Gender adviser no. 4, EU civilian CSDP mission, Interview with author, virtual, 25 June 2024; Gender adviser no. 8, EU civilian CSDP mission, Interview with author, virtual, 9 July 2024; and Gender adviser no. 11 (note 30).

³² Gender adviser no. 4 (note 31); and Gender adviser no. 11 (note 30).



equality, which helps significantly.³³ PPI sections recognizing that gender mainstreaming and equality are not only about the words used or the number of women visible in photos is a strong example of whole-of-mission gender mainstreaming.³⁴

Specific contextual knowledge is also essential for both communications and gender experts. When national staff work closely with gender advisers and PPIOs, missions are more likely to engage well with local media and the public communications aimed at host communities (particularly local language translation). National staff have a contextualized understanding of the cultural norms around gender, which may differ from some mission personnel or the EU baseline understanding.³⁵ Best-case scenarios have PPI sections with a gender focal point and national staff, and gender advisers with national staff assistance.

CHALLENGES

Best practices rarely make it outside of individual missions, and collaboration is often dependent on individual personalities, making it difficult to maintain existing best practices through personnel changes. Interviewees identified several challenges to gender-responsive strategic communications.

Lack of formal guidance for gender-responsive communications

Personality dependence can preclude systematizing certain practices or norms where consistency is key.³⁶ Cyber security concerns that restrict communications can also limit the ability to share ad hoc best practices or mission-level practices to improve gender-responsive communications.³⁷ The Civilian CSDP Compact does call for investment in gender-responsive leadership, which includes seeing and encouraging connections between gender equality and all other aspects of missions' work.³⁸ However, a lack of accountability mechanisms often precludes senior management's motivation to fully take on board any guidance that is received from the EEAS, such as the Strategy and Action Plan's reporting requirements. Numerous interviewees noted that positive working-level and operational collaboration did exist, but that management and mission leadership did not always see the value.³⁹ This makes sustainable, long-term change difficult, although policy language can

³³ PPIO no. 1 (note 15); and PPIO no. 2 (note 15).

³⁴ Gender adviser no. 9 (note 27).

³⁵ Gender adviser no. 4 (note 31); Gender adviser no. 6, EU civilian CSDP mission, Interview with author, virtual, 28 June 2024; Gender adviser no. 10 (note 20); Gender adviser no. 11 (note 30); Gender adviser focus group, Discussion with author, virtual, 25 Apr. 2024; PPIO no. 1 (note 15); and PPIO no. 2 (note 15). Birchall (note 7) also notes that considering gender perspectives in context analysis has positive effects in strategic communication initiatives in conflict-affected contexts.

³⁶ Gender adviser no. 10 (note 20).

³⁷ Salzinger, M. and Desmidt, S., 'Gender equality in EU external action: The gender action plan and the women, peace, and security agenda', ECDPM Briefing Note no. 162, Apr. 2023.

³⁸ Groves-Williams, L., *The Gender-Responsive Leader's Handbook* (FBA: Sandö, 2024).

³⁹ Gender adviser no. 1 (note 19); Gender adviser no. 4 (note 31); and Gender adviser no. 5 (note 28); Gender adviser no. 8 (note 31); Gender adviser no. 9 (note 27); Gender adviser no. 10 (note 20); and Gender adviser focus group (note 35).



be a saving grace in these situations, as personnel are able to say ‘look, here’s the document, it says we have to do this’.⁴⁰

Challenges caused by the lack of formal guidance are exacerbated by sometimes unavoidable gaps between personnel changes, particularly in positions in small sections requiring thematic expertise, such as gender advisers or PPIOs. Momentum can be lost, or collaborative initiatives between PPIOs and gender advisers can be diminished in their efficacy (or disappear entirely) as a result. Gaps between appointments are not entirely avoidable, but institutionalizing certain practices through formalized guidance or tools ensures they are taken forward with minimal disruption when personnel rotate out of assignments. Regaining understanding or convincing new people of the importance of certain topics or initiatives without such institutionalization takes time and energy and is not always successful.⁴¹ Having clear instructions, goals and indicators—such as the number of social media posts or a checklist for language in communications on mission activities—makes the execution of solid gender-responsive communications easier. For example, when the EU Police Mission in Afghanistan (EUPOL Afghanistan) was operational, it had a list of key messages on gender for senior management to repeat in all capacities; all it takes to replicate this practice is to ask, ‘what are our key messages on gender and how do we communicate them?’.⁴²

Context dependence

Although the EU has whole-system priorities regarding the WPS agenda and gender mainstreaming, member states, host countries and individuals often have different perceptions.⁴³ Many contexts within which civilian CSDP missions operate are sceptical of or hostile towards activities that are seen to advance a ‘Western notion’ of gender—a framing often driven or exacerbated by disinformation campaigns.⁴⁴ Particularly while remaining true to the do-no-harm approach (avoiding unintentional negative effects of CSDP activities), efforts to make external communications gender responsive can be complicated in environments where ‘gender’ as a topic is seen as inflammatory.⁴⁵ This is made even more difficult when missions’ PPI sections do not have gender focal points or when gender advisers do not have national staff’s formalized help to adapt messaging and activities to the host country context.

Balancing representation with other gender-related objectives

The Civilian CSDP Compact contains an ambitious commitment to raising women’s representation to at least 40 per cent at all levels, including mission leadership, while affirming that gender parity remains the ultimate goal. Setting targets for women’s representation and participation can be

⁴⁰ Gender adviser no. 4 (note 31).

⁴¹ Gender adviser no. 10 (note 20).

⁴² Gender adviser no. 5 (note 28).

⁴³ Gender adviser no. 6 (note 35); Gender adviser focus group (note 35); Gender adviser no. 7 (note 4); Gender adviser no. 10 (note 20); and Gender adviser no. 11 (note 30).

⁴⁴ Gender adviser no. 4 (note 31).

⁴⁵ Gender adviser no. 6 (note 35); Gender adviser no. 10 (note 20); Gender adviser no. 11 (note 30); and PPIO no. 1 (note 15). See also Council of the EU, 9588/23 (note 1).



an important way to move towards widespread institutional change (e.g. increasing representation and visible diversity). This strategy of looking to numbers as an indication of progress can be useful in motivating an increase in the representation of minority groups at all levels of crisis management. However, as recognized in the Strategy and Action Plan, targets are not a silver bullet, and numbers are only one part of the story.⁴⁶

Trends point to a hyper focus on parity as a stand-in term for the entirety of the WPS agenda, which can divert attention and resources from its full implementation and trap gender-responsive strategic communications specifically at a very superficial level.⁴⁷ This is illustrated by the fact that the PPIOs interviewed focused largely on women's participation when discussing how gender is integrated into their activities. If showcasing women's participation is the limit of gender-responsive communications, PPI sections may portray more of a gender balance than actually exists in missions (e.g. through photos and media coverage of patrols), given that parity targets are still a long way off.⁴⁸ The limitations of the communication forms available to mission personnel can also complicate this; social media, press releases and web pages are concise formats 'not necessarily conducive to a nuanced gender analysis', although still valuable.⁴⁹

Including men in gender-responsive strategic communications

To achieve parity and sustainably work towards gender equality, strategic communications around gender must not only focus on women, and the whole-system mainstreaming priorities should be understood as the responsibility of all personnel. Engaging men to change gender norms can reduce the risk of backlash against women; it is also key to reducing the use of harmful stereotypes, especially in contexts of armed conflict, insecurity and militarization.⁵⁰ The Strategy and Action Plan notes that showing many forms of femininity and masculinity should be a goal of strategic communications in civilian CSDP missions.⁵¹ Transforming gender stereotypes also improves working environments (e.g. reducing sexism), which in turn improves personnel retention.

Stereotypes play out across the types of work expected of mission personnel on the basis of gender. Gender advisers tend to be all women or include 'one token male', despite the fact that missions are over 50 per cent men, and tacit expectations that women are the key responsible parties for gender equality work are pervasive.⁵² Gender focal point networks, however, show positive progress; at the end of 2023, the balance of gender focal points in civilian CSDP missions was 43 per cent men and 57 per cent women.⁵³

⁴⁶ Baldwin, G., 'Considering the future of gender and peace operations: Strategic debates and operational challenges', SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security no. 2022/09, Dec. 2022; and EEAS (note 1).

⁴⁷ Baldwin (note 46); Significantly, critiques just a few years ago noted a fixation on conflict-related sexual violence as a stand-in issue for the WPS agenda; extensive interviews conducted by the author across UN peace operations indicate that parity has now replaced it.

⁴⁸ PPIO no. 2 (note 15).

⁴⁹ Gender adviser no. 2 (note 20).

⁵⁰ Birchall (note 7).

⁵¹ EEAS (note 1).

⁵² Gender adviser no. 4 (note 31).

⁵³ EEAS official, Communication with author, 4 Oct. 2024.



Foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI)

Many interviewees shared that FIMI is not a big concern for their mission (and it falls more to e.g. EU delegations). A 2023 study notes that while civilian CSDP missions ‘have not been the main targets of systematic disinformation campaigns’, they ‘still face threats posed by disinformation targeting the EU as a whole’.⁵⁴ In missions which are affected by FIMI, such attacks are typically not seen as being ‘gendered’ and a gender analysis is seen as irrelevant or something the mission is not equipped to carry out.

Interviewees also noted that in certain mission contexts, ‘gender’ has become an increasingly loaded term.⁵⁵ Indeed, backlash against women’s rights and so-called gender ideology, together with rising, coordinated disinformation campaigns driven by growing conservative movements, is making it more difficult to openly do gender work.⁵⁶ A recent report by the EEAS on FIMI targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (or questioning) and intersex (LGBTQI+) persons does not identify specific examples linked to civilian CSDP missions, but does cite multiple incidents in countries that host missions (the Central African Republic, Georgia, Somalia and Ukraine). Moreover, it points out that ‘nearly 80% of documented incidents also targeted specific entities in relation to LGBTQI+ rights and communities, such as Western governments, the Ukrainian government and non-governmental entities, the EU, international organizations, and sports organizations’.⁵⁷ Therefore, the ecosystem that civilian CSDP missions belong to is at risk.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to more fully address EU-wide priorities on gender parity, equality, analysis and mainstreaming, strategic communications in civilian CSDP missions must be gender responsive. Personnel are already implementing good, collaborative practices on a largely ad hoc basis, providing a solid base on which to build deliberate guidance. In bringing gender analysis and mainstreaming to bear through gender-responsive strategic communications, missions could better address the EU’s institutional goals around gender that are laid out in the Civilian CSDP Compact and other documents, such as the Strategy and Action Plan, the EU Strategic Approach to WPS and the EU Gender Action Plan III, as well as in ongoing work on capability development, training, counter-FIMI, gender parity, and more.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Fridman, O., Baudais, V. and Gigitashvili, G., ‘Enhancing the capabilities of CSDP missions and operations to identify and respond to disinformation attacks’, European Parliament, Subcommittee on Security and Defence (SEDE), 17 Feb. 2023.

⁵⁵ Gender adviser no. 6 (note 35); Gender adviser no. 10 (note 20); Gender adviser no. 11 (note 30); and PPIO no. 2 (note 15).

⁵⁶ Seong-eun Bergsten, S. and Ah Lee, S., ‘The global backlash against women’s rights’, Human Rights Watch, 7 Mar. 2023; Radačić, I. and Facio, A., ‘Gender equality and gender backlash’, UN Human Rights Special Procedures, Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls, 2020; and UN, ‘Progress in Security Council’s women, peace, security agenda lacking, as sexual violence, insufficient protection, absence in peace processes continues’, SC/15221, 7 Mar. 2023.

⁵⁷ EEAS, ‘FIMI targeting LGBTQI+ people: Well-informed analysis to protect human rights and diversity’, Report on FIMI Threats, Oct. 2023, p. 14.

⁵⁸ Joachim, J., Schneiker, A. and Jenichen, A., ‘External networks and institutional idiosyncrasies: The Common Security and Defense Policy and UNSCR1325 on women, peace and security’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 30, no. 1 (2017), p. 18.

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**STOCKHOLM INTERNATIONAL
PEACE RESEARCH INSTITUTE**

Signalistgatan 9
SE-169 72 Solna, Sweden
Telephone: +46 8 655 97 00
Email: sipri@sipri.org
Internet: www.sipri.org

It is particularly important that there is complementary strategic guidance around these goals through a gender-responsive strategic communications lens. If strategically designed and executed, this can help build public understanding and approval of mission activities in host countries and EU member states, disrupt harmful gender stereotypes, increase visibility and recruitment of women in missions, and deter mis- and disinformation. The following recommendations can strengthen these efforts.

1. *Formalize gender-responsive guidance for the strategic communications of civilian CSDP missions.* This is in line with the compact's commitment to develop a coherent and clear communication strategy (commitment 9) and ensure sustained and robust communication strategies (deliverable 9). In tandem, scaling up some of the ad hoc, mission-level guidance (e.g. gender-neutral language guides), implementing a checklist tool, and providing training on gender-responsive communications through the CPCC will help ensure consistency, enable advance planning and curb personality dependence.
2. *Strengthen accountability mechanisms for gender-responsive leadership across senior management.* This includes prioritizing gender-responsive communications and mandate implementation. Updating the Strategy and Action Plan provides a good starting point, as it can guide reporting and lay out specific requirements, and it is also in line with the compact's deliverable on gender-responsive leadership capacities (16.f).
3. *Improve contextual awareness by mainstreaming thematic and national expertise.* This includes ensuring that PPI sections have gender focal points and that PPIs and gender advisers have national staff informing their activities.
4. *Include men in all aspects of gender work.* This can be done both by rejecting stereotypical representations of men and masculinity in communications, as noted in the Strategy and Action Plan, and by encouraging men to volunteer as gender focal points or recruiting men as gender advisers.
5. *Continually address barriers to women's participation and promote institutional change.* This should be done through the implementation of all the strategic communication action areas laid out in the Strategy and Action Plan and be included in the updated Strategy and Action Plan.
6. *Look ahead to future gendered FIMI threats.* These are on the rise and likely to continue growing. Even if gender-related FIMI does not yet explicitly target civilian CSDP missions (or infrequently), the backlash mission personnel are experiencing towards the use of the word 'gender', attacks on the larger EU ecosystem and the reality that host community members do not always register the difference between different EU entities (e.g. EU delegation and EU civilian CSDP mission) all indicate that gendered FIMI threats will get worse before they get better.