

# EU for Girls

**Civil Society Assessment of EU policies  
(2019-2023) advancing girls' rights**



# EU for Girls: Acting for girls' rights

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## What is the European Week of Action for Girls (EWAG)?

The **European Week of Action for Girls** is a week-long series of events and activities organised around the International Day of the Girl Child on October 11 by a coalition of civil society organisations. The goal of the EWAG coalition is to **ensure girls' voices and aspirations are heard by the EU institutions, and that girls' rights are at the core of the EU's external action.**

For more than 10 years, EWAG has been creating a space for engagement with the European decision makers in Brussels.

EWAG has been calling on the EU to **advance girls' rights by focusing on five pillars:**

- Promote Equal Political and Civic Participation
- Advance Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR)
- Eradicate Harmful Gender Norms and Stereotypes
- Boost Youth Economic Empowerment
- Promote Inclusive and Quality Education

As the European Commission leadership and European Parliament approach the end of their term, EWAG is looking back at the past years since the start of the current mandate in 2019, to assess EU policies and actions in terms of their contribution to promoting girls' rights.

**This paper provides an overview of positive advancements and shortcomings, and puts forward a set of recommendations on how to better advance girls' rights in EU external action onwards.**



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## Advancing girls' rights through EU policy frameworks

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## Youth Action Plan (YAP) 2022-2026

### Top 3 achievements

- 1. Value-based partnership** (Human rights-based approach, gender equality, participatory approach, youth inclusion and evidence-based approach).
- 2. Increased youth participation** in EU decision-making processes through the creation of youth advisory structures, the youth sounding board and the Youth Dialogue Platform.
- 3. Focus on intersectionality and diversity** and emphasis on issues that are key to youth empowerment, such as Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) and SRHR.

### Top 3 missed opportunities

- 1. No dedicated and adequate funding** attached to the YAP implementation.
- The YAP should make **more efforts to include harder-to-reach youth**, and youth in conditions of marginalisation and exclusion.
- 3. No clear distinction between children and young people.** Children and youth might have overlapping needs but it is important to apply a life cycle approach to establish distinct efforts in response to age specific needs.

The YAP, adopted by the European Commission in 2022, is the first ever EU guiding framework to promote meaningful youth participation and empowerment globally for sustainable development, equality and peace.

The YAP is built around 3 pillars: Engage, Empower and Connect.

- The **ENGAGE** pillar looks at how the EU can ensure **meaningful, inclusive and effective youth participation, supporting the voice and leadership of young people**, in particular young women and girls, youth activists and organisations, at all levels.
- The **EMPOWER** pillar is about making sure that youth globally are empowered so their voices can be heard and inequalities that affect their lives are tackled.
  - As part of these efforts, the YAP includes the EU's commitment to continue to **support education reforms** in partner countries with a focus on access, equity, quality, inclusion, governance, gender-transformative programmes and financing and **specific attention to girls' education**, including support for CSE.

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- The YAP also includes provisions to **improve young people's access to economic opportunities**, including a gender perspective to bridge the digital gender divide that is a significant challenge for girls. At the same time, it recognises that youth need economic resources that are accessible to all.
- Finally, the YAP also commits to **promoting universal access to youth-friendly SRHR**, including CSE, focusing on adolescent girls, marginalised and LGBTIQ+ young people.
- The **CONNECT** pillar looks at creating connections. EU action aims to promote inclusive learning mobility, increase learning opportunities, and to foster exchanges for the professional and personal development of young people. The goal is to ensure diversity and inclusiveness while paying attention to social and economic barriers, the digital divide and risks related to disinformation.

Overall, **the YAP is a solid and ambitious framework that demonstrates political willingness to take meaningful youth inclusion and empowerment to the next level, including for girls.** However, it is unclear how much funding will be supporting these ambitions. While three flagship initiatives have been launched, there is no specific budget allocated to the implementation of the YAP, which will be implemented (and thus funded) through the EU's existing instruments, such as the Neighbourhood, Development, International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) – Global Europe.



## EU Gender Action Plan (GAP III) for external action 2021-2025

### Top 3 achievements

- 1. Gender transformative approach**, addressing gender norms and imbalances of power which disadvantage women and girls.
- 2. Addresses the intersectionality of gender with other forms of discrimination.**
- 3. Inclusion of concrete targets**, with 85% of all new actions throughout external relations having to contribute to gender equality and women's empowerment by 2025.

### Top 3 missed opportunities:

- 1. No visible mainstreaming of GAP commitments across all areas** of the EU's foreign and security policy, international trade, climate and humanitarian action and others in line with the Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD) principle.

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**2. No recognition of the need for age-specific considerations** for actions to promote gender equality, in particular in the area of SRHR (e.g. accessible and youth-friendly information and services).

**3. No funding envelope is formally attached to the GAP implementation.** More funding should be allocated to gender-targeted actions: the GAP objective of one gender-targeted action in each partner country is not ambitious enough.

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GAP III, adopted by the European Commission in 2021, is the EU's guiding framework to promote gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment globally. GAP acknowledges **girls and young women are active drivers of change** and recognises the vital role of youth-led groups and girl activists, committing to **supporting their civic engagement and leadership**.

The GAP identifies priority areas of intervention to accelerate progress towards gender equality including:

- **Ensuring freedom from all forms of Gender-based violence (GBV).** This includes the commitment to contribute to the elimination of harmful practices such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and Child Early and Forced Marriage (CEFM). To achieve this, the EU is committed to challenging harmful gender norms, also engaging men and boys, traditional and religious leaders and all relevant stakeholders.
- **Promoting SRHR.** The EU is committed to promoting an enabling legal, political and societal environment that protects the SRHR of women and girls and increases access to SRH services and information.
- **Strengthening economic and social rights and empowering girls and women.** The EU is committed to taking actions to boost economic empowerment for women and girls, as well as promoting gender equality in education by increasing investment in girls' education and improving access to CSE for in-school and out-of-school adolescents.
- **Advancing equal participation and leadership.** The EU is committed to encouraging young women and adolescent girls' civic engagement, also in partnership with youth organisations, as well as promoting an enabling and safe environment, including online, for civil society, girls and women's rights organisations.

**Overall, the GAP III is a strong and comprehensive policy framework**, which includes important commitments to the advancement of girls' rights as part of the EU's external action.





### Top 3 achievements:



- 1. Focus on key systemic priorities**, including the achievement of the SDGs, Universal Health Coverage (UHC), better health for all during the life course and SRHR.
- 2. Focus on access to health services for the most marginalised and underserved**, including women and girls, young people, and LGBTIQ+ people.
- 3. Stronger internal coordination and coherence at EU level**, with a “health in all policies” approach and stronger coordination between EU and Member States.

### Top 3 missed opportunities:



- 1. No specific budget is attached to the GHS implementation.** Funding should come from existing financing instruments and programmes, which have not always prioritised health or are severely underfunded. The focus on “innovative” ways of financing, including through the private sector, raises concerns when it comes to the health sector.
- 2. The monitoring framework has not yet been developed:** it remains to be seen how the implementation will be done and how results will be measured.
- 3. As of September 2023, Member States have not yet committed to the GHS implementation**, sending a negative political signal when it comes to the EU’s role and united voice at the global level.

The [Global Health Strategy](#), adopted by the European Commission in 2022, is the EU’s new guiding framework to accelerate progress in the achievement of health-related SDGs and deepen the EU’s leadership on global health.

While the Strategy focuses on health promotion, it includes key provisions that are relevant for the advancement of girls’ rights, in particular girls’ rights to health. Overall, it aims at tackling the root causes of ill health, paying particular attention to the rights of women and girls.

Additionally, **the EU commits to strengthening its support for universal access to SRHR, with a focus on women, girls, young people and people with disabilities.** This includes addressing GBV, harmful practices, unmet need for family planning, preventable maternal mortality and gender inequalities.

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## EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child 2021-2024

### Top 3 achievements:



- 1. Recognition of children as active citizens and agents of change** playing a leading role in society, increase child participation by e.g. child-specific consultations and the creation of an EU Child Participation Platform allowing children to be involved in EU decision-making processes.
- 2. Commitment to creating a child-friendly culture in EU policy-making**, including by ensuring child-friendly and accessible language in documents published by the EU.
- 3. Recognition that all children should have guaranteed access to inclusive, non-segregated quality education**, regardless of their racial and ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, nationality, residence status, sex and sexual orientation.

### Top 3 missed opportunities:



- 1. Limited attention given to diversity and intersectionality:** the Strategy does not propose actions to address power imbalances and structural challenges through a gender-transformative approach.
- 2. Lack of inclusive and rights-based participation for all children.** There is space to further ensure the participation of children in vulnerable situations and/or socially excluded, and children outside the EU. This includes an external dimension of the EU Child Participation Platform.
- 3. Limited actions and recommendations on combating violence against intersex children, girls, and FGM survivors**, or supporting children directly or indirectly impacted by justice systems and children in migration.

The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child represents an ambitious roadmap to **mainstream children's rights in EU policies**. Adopted by the European Commission in 2021, it outlines proposals, actions and initiatives to promote the rights of children across six thematic areas, each one defining the priorities for action within the EU and globally for the years to come.

The strategy includes a global dimension, which commits to **championing children's rights in development and humanitarian policies, actions and funds**, in alignment with the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy and other relevant initiatives such as the EU Guidelines on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of the Child, The Guidelines on Children and Armed Conflict and the EU Gender Action Plan for external action 2021-2025.

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There is also a **commitment to continue supporting children in humanitarian crises** while applying a needs-based approach in accordance with the humanitarian principles, as well as ensuring that its aid is gender and age sensitive. Child protection is emphasised, addressing all forms of violence against children, especially against girls, providing mental health and psychosocial support, providing continued access to safe, quality and inclusive education and implementing a zero tolerance approach to child labour. **The strategy commits to dedicating 10% of overall funding** under the NDICI in Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and the Pacific and the Americas and the Caribbean **to education** and to continue allocating 10% of humanitarian aid funding for education in emergencies.

It also calls for the designation of youth focal points and strengthening child protection capacities within the EU Delegations.



## EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025

### Top 3 achievements



- 1. The EU's accession to the Istanbul Convention**, a key treaty on combating violence against women and girls and a fundamental pillar to promote equal opportunities in Europe.
- The proposal for a **Directive to combat violence against women and domestic violence**: an important step in recognizing GBV, for the first time targeted by EU-wide legislation and through a comprehensive approach.
- 3. Dedicated funding for projects benefiting CSOs** available through the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme.

### Top 3 missed opportunities:



- We recommend increasing funding available and exploring **innovative financing mechanisms** that could support the sectors' efforts to achieve the commitments defined in the Strategy.
- 2. Lack of transparency and collaboration with CSOs by the Task Force for Equality**, composed of representatives of Commission services and the European External Action Service and created to ensure the implementation of equality mainstreaming, including gender equality, at the operational and technical levels, and to co-develop and improve EU legislation
- 3. SRHR are not recognised as a key component of the Strategy**, to ensure coherence between EU internal and external policies on gender equality.

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The EU has adopted a Gender Equality Strategy to commit to achieving a gender-equal Europe by 2025.

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The key policy objectives identified by the Strategy cover different areas, including:

- **Ending GBV** in all its forms, both inside and outside the EU, through preventing and combating violence, supporting and protecting victims and holding perpetrators accountable.
- **Challenging gender stereotypes** as the root cause of gender inequality affecting all areas of society. Moreover, the strategy focuses on effective prevention through education of boys and girls about gender equality and non-violent relationships, with a focus on men, boys and masculinities.
- **Closing gender gaps in the labour market and achieving equal participation across different sectors of the economy.**
- **Closing the gender care gap and achieving gender balance in decision-making and in politics** to allow citizens from all backgrounds to meaningfully participate in society, democracy, and policy-making, and to break the glass ceiling.
- **Increasing funding to make progress in gender equality in the EU**, by integrating a gender dimension in the Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF) and in various EU funding instruments.

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## Advancing girls' rights through regional partnerships

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Since 2019, the EU has strengthened its relations with numerous regions around the world. These political partnerships will have an impact on the lives of women, girls and youth worldwide. In the following section, the EWAG coalition reviews the extent to which these partnerships have considered girls' rights.

## Partnership between the African Union and the European Union

### Top 3 achievements

- 1. Focus on inclusive and equitable quality education**, with the objective of addressing the gaps resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 2. Efforts to promote the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security, Children and Armed Conflict and the Youth, Peace and Security Agendas**, and underpin these with concrete actions to achieve durable peace.
- 3. Positive focus on climate resilience.**

### Top 3 missed opportunities:

- 1. Limited space for youth participation** in the development and implementation of the partnership. No clear and accessible mechanisms through which African and European youth can be engaged.
- 2. Omission of 'sensitive' topics:** The partnership Joint Vision does not commit to the promotion of areas that are key for the promotion of girls' rights, but are too often seen as controversial, such as SRHR and CSE.
- 3. Lack of human development dimension of youth empowerment.**

Ahead of the AU-EU Summit in February 2022, EWAG young advocates developed and presented to decision-makers concrete policy recommendations on how the renewed EU-AU partnership could advance girls' rights.

The main outcome of the Summit was the adoption of the Joint Vision for 2030, which offers a common policy agenda for the two blocs. It emphasises the importance of **gender equality and women's empowerment** in all spheres of life, the fight against inequalities, support for children's rights, and the **inclusion of women, young people and the most disadvantaged**. However, it does not address girls' needs and aspirations and fails to identify specific actions to advance their rights, with SRHR being excluded from the declaration.

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While EWAG welcomes the commitment to investing in youth and women to support their empowerment, skills, education and employment prospects, the **human development dimension of young people is very weak**, with youth mostly perceived as economic actors. However, their **active political participation in decision-making processes should be considered a key aspect** for the future of the continents.

**When it comes to civil society and young people's involvement and ownership, the Partnership is a disappointment:** there are no clear and accessible mechanisms through which African and European youth and civil society can be engaged in monitoring and following-up the commitments of the Partnership. While youth have been involved in exchanges ahead of the AU-EU Summit, **this engagement took place at the very last moment**, with hardly any possibilities for youth views and recommendations to be meaningfully addressed by EU and AU decision-makers.



## Partnership between the EU and the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pasific States

### Top 3 achievements

- 1. Recognition of youth as actors of positive change**, with a commitment to promote the active participation of young people in society, including in the development, implementation, and follow-up of policies affecting them.
- 2. Clear commitment to promote SRHR and fully implement the Maputo Protocol and its Plan of Action**, which is a progressive and innovative regional framework protecting and promoting women and girls' rights in Africa.
- 3. Commitment to the setup of an open and transparent mechanism for structured consultation with stakeholders**, which could hopefully enable girls and youth to be meaningfully involved in the monitoring and implementation of the partnership.

### Top 3 missed opportunities:

- 1. EU member states only agreed to sign the new partnership agreement in July 2023**, because of previous opposition from a few countries, thus delaying its entry into force.
- 2. Girls and youth, as well as broader civil society, were not meaningfully consulted** in the shaping of the new partnership agreement.
- 3. Failure to identify sexual orientation and gender identity as important factors**, often intersecting with other vulnerabilities and exacerbating discrimination and inequalities, including for youth.

In 2021, the EU and OACPS finalised the negotiations for a new legally binding partnership agreement, which should guide the relations between the two blocs for the 20 years to come.

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Through the new agreement, **EU and ACP countries are recognising the key role of youth as actors of positive change** and are committing to promoting the active participation of young people in society.

The agreement recognises that gender equality and empowerment of women and girls are essential to achieving inclusive and sustainable development, and has the specific objective of fostering human and social development, with special attention paid to women and girls. This includes **combating and prosecuting all forms of sexual and gender based violence and discrimination in the public and private spheres and eliminating all harmful practices.**

Additionally, the partnership clearly commits to the promotion of SRHR. In particular, the African pillar of the agreement includes a specific commitment to fully implement the Maputo Protocol and its Plan of Action, which is a progressive and innovative regional framework protecting and promoting women and girls' rights, by legally prohibiting FGM and early and forced marriage. It is also good to see **EU and ACP countries recognising the importance of ensuring access to quality and affordable comprehensive sexual and reproductive health information and education.**

When it comes to civil society and young people's involvement and ownership, the Partnership is a mixed picture. While **young people were not consulted ahead of the negotiations**, the agreement **commits to the setup of an open and transparent mechanism for structured consultation** with stakeholders: once in place, this would allow civil society and youth to be meaningfully involved in the monitoring and implementation of the partnership.



## Partnership between the EU and the Latin American and Caribbean States

### Top 3 achievements



- 1. Emphasis on the people-to-people aspect of the Partnership**, highlighting the need for exchange and dialogue and acknowledging the importance of working together as sovereign partners.
- 2. In the EU-CELAC Summit Declaration all countries commit to fighting multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and gender based violence, to promote gender equality, the full and equal representation and participation of all women and girls in decision-making processes**, the rights of the child and recognizing the rights of people in situations of vulnerability.



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3. Progressive language and commitments on **climate change and biodiversity**, in line with the recommendations of young people ahead of the Summit.

## Top 3 missed opportunities:



1. **Gap between young people, civil society and local authorities and the Heads of State in the Summit** and only half a sentence in the declaration acknowledging the EU-LAC Forum, where comprehensive recommendations and suggestions were put forward by the stakeholders.
2. **Failure to acknowledge young people's contribution** to the EU-CELAC partnership and its future as well.
3. **Failure to recognise SRHR, education and youth employment as key factors** for thriving continents and consequently a thriving partnership.

Eight years after their last gathering, leaders from the EU and from the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) met in Brussels for the third EU-CELAC summit in July 2023. They discussed a broad range of issues and adopted a declaration. Additionally, the EU-LAC Global Gateway Investment Agenda, where the Global Gateway is the EU's investment offer to its partner countries, was considered a key deliverable of the Summit.

While the declaration mentions a clear **commitment to fighting intersecting forms of discrimination including GBV, the promotion of gender equality and the rights of the child, the protection of all human rights and fundamental freedoms**, we spot some weak links. SRHR is not mentioned in the declaration, while education is only mentioned in the framework of the Global Gateway linked to the need to mobilise public and private capital, without a broader acknowledgement of education as a transformative tool for both partners. Moreover, the role and **contribution of young people is not considered in the declaration**, despite the significant share of young population in the CELAC region.

When it comes to civil society and young people's involvement and ownership, there is a long way to go. Before the Summit, the EU hosted the EU-LAC Forum in an effort to promote an exchange with non-state actors on the future of both regions, including private sector, civil society, local authorities and young people. All groups, albeit in a siloed manner, were active in its planning and produced sets of recommendations to feed into the Heads of State discussions. While there is no assurance of a link between this and the Summit, young people were loud and clear in asking for a partnership that promotes intercultural dialogue and conversation, political participation for children and youth, education and youth employment opportunities and a partnership that is committed to the fight against climate change.

# **EWAG coalition assessment and conclusions**

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The above analysed policy frameworks include strong commitments to advancing girls' rights. To understand whether the EU is delivering on these commitments, it is important to assess if the EU is providing adequate funding to translate these commitments into concrete actions and to check if the EU is meaningfully consulting and involving youth and girls around the policy processes that will have an impact on them.

## Is the EU providing adequate financial support for the promotion of girls' rights?

There is currently no mechanism to effectively track the amount of funding invested in the promotion of girls' rights.

**The EU is monitoring its commitment to dedicate 85% of all new external action projects to the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment by 2025. According to the most recent available data, the share had reached 70% in 2021<sup>1</sup>.** Yet, this figure does not provide a clear picture of the amount of funding dedicated to gender equality. This is why civil society organisations have been calling on the EU to commit to funding targets rather than project-related targets: 85% of the EU's Official Development Assistance (ODA) should go to programmes where gender equality is a significant component and 20% of ODA should go to programmes where gender equality is a principal component.<sup>2</sup>

**Funding for women's rights organisations (WRO) is also crucial for the advancement of girls' rights.** In this regard, direct funding from the EU to WROs reached 8.9 million EUR in 2021, which is a 27.7% increase compared to 2020 (6.97 million EUR). However, this direct support to WROs and gender equality institutions represents less than 0.5% of EU institutions' total ODA focusing on gender equality.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, it is also interesting to monitor how much the EU is investing in the promotion of sometimes contested areas of gender equality, that are nonetheless essential for the promotion of girls' rights. According to the latest analysis from the 2023 Donors Delivering for SRHR report,<sup>4</sup> **the EU institutions invested 342.59 million USD in SRHR in 2021, which only accounts for 1.76 % of the total ODA spending of EU Institutions.** There is thus an urgent need to strengthen the prioritisation of investments in SRHR as part of the EU's external action.

<sup>1</sup> European Commission, Directorate-General for International Partnerships, 2022 annual report on the implementation of the European Union's external action instruments in 2021, Publications Office of the European Union, 2022, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2841/322581>.

<sup>2</sup> CONCORD Europe. Implementing the EU Gender Action Plan III: Turning ambition into impact?, 2023, <https://concordeurope.org/resource/implementing-the-eu-gender-action-plan-iii-turning-ambition-into-impact/>.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

<sup>5</sup> DSW, Donors Delivering for SRHR 2023 report, [https://donorsdelivering.report/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/DD\\_Report2023\\_v6\\_spreads-1.pdf](https://donorsdelivering.report/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/DD_Report2023_v6_spreads-1.pdf).

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## Is the EU meaningfully involving girls and youth in policy making?

The current European Commissioner for International Partnerships, Jutta Urpilainen, has clearly stated multiple times that supporting youth is a key political priority of her mandate. Over the past years, DG INTPA adopted a set of initiatives that aim at strengthening the meaningful engagement of young people in the policy-making process:

- **The establishment of the Youth Sounding Board**, which is an advisory body made of young people who advise the Commissioner and DG INTPA on youth participation and empowerment in EU external action. It provides an opportunity for youth to feed into the EU decision-making process on issues that are relevant to them.
- **The setup of the Youth Dialogue Platform**, which provides a space for dialogue with youth-focused and youth-led organisations on EU's external action, to be consulted around specific EU initiatives and processes. The Platform will also be consulted on the monitoring and implementation of the YAP.
- **The appointment of a Special Adviser on Youth** to Commissioner Urpilainen.

Despite these very positive steps, EWAG underlines **some shortcomings over the past years, when youth were not consulted in a meaningful way**. This was the case at the AU-EU Summit, when young people were involved at the very last moment, with hardly any possibilities for their views and recommendations to be taken into consideration. It seems to be again the case for the 2023 EU-CELAC Summit, where despite some effort made by the EU, young people were involved in a siloed manner and without much impact.

## To build on these strong commitments, EWAG shares the following recommendations with EU institutions:

- **Meaningfully involve youth and girls** around concrete policy processes that have an impact on their lives, by leveraging the Youth Dialogue Platform and the Youth Sounding Board.
- Mobilise **adequate financial resources** to make sure commitments are translated into concrete programmes and actions.
  - Ensure that funding is allocated to measures that can advance girls' rights in EU partner countries and regions as part of the **mid-term review of the NDICI**.
  - **Assess how Multiannual Indicative Programmes** - which govern the allocation of funding in partner countries - impact girls' rights and make sure that funding is allocated to activities that can advance girls' rights.
- **Continue championing girls' rights on the global stage**, especially at a time of backlash against women's and girls' rights around the world. The EU should keep girls' rights as a priority of the policy and political dialogue with partner countries and regions, and should not shy away from potentially sensitive areas of the girls' rights agenda, such as SRHR and the fight against harmful gender norms and stereotypes.

