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## **THE GENDER EQUALITY FACILITY (GEF):** **UN WOMEN'S APPROACH TO ADVANCING EU MEMBERSHIP** **THROUGH GENDER-RESPONSIVE REFORMS IN THE** **WESTERN BALKANS AND EASTERN PARTNERSHIP COUNTRIES**

The Gender Equality Facility (GEF) is a UN Women initiative designed to align national institutions, ministries, and governments with the EU Gender Equality acquis as part of the EU accession process in South-East Europe and the Western Balkans. The GEF aims to ensure that gender equality is mainstreamed into national policies, strategies, and governance frameworks across the region. It is a key part of EU integration efforts, preparing candidate countries for membership by focusing on gender-responsive reforms in governance, justice, public finance, and more.

The GEF provides technical support to governments to integrate the EU Gender Equality acquis into national legislation and policy. It ensures gender equality is treated as a cross-sectoral priority, contributing to governance reforms that promote socio-economic equality for women and girls. By focusing on gender mainstreaming, the GEF helps countries comply with EU norms and international standards like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5). Additionally, it supports the implementation of the EU Gender Equality Agenda and policies, such as Gender Action Plan III facilitating the achievement of its targets.



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The policy brief aims to achieve two key objectives. First, it provides a comprehensive overview of the expected outcomes, best practices, and lessons learned from the implementation of the GEF in Western Balkans countries, including Albania, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Kosovo<sup>\*1</sup>. This analysis is intended to inform ongoing and future gender-responsive reforms in governance, justice, and public finance across the region. Second, as the GEF expands to Eastern Partnership countries — specifically Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia — the brief offers projections on programming, strategic outlook, and visioning for these countries. By drawing on the experiences of the Western Balkans, it seeks to guide the alignment of national policies with the EU Gender Equality acquis in the Eastern Partnership, ensuring a smooth transition and effective implementation of gender equality reforms.



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## 1. GEF Implementation in Western Balkan Countries

The GEF initiative was launched in Albania in 2014, grounded in the vision of leveraging EU integration to advance gender equality in accession countries and ensure benefits for women and girls. Since its inception, the initiative has expanded to other Western Balkan countries, generating valuable knowledge and best practices in gender mainstreaming within the context of EU integration. By applying gender mainstreaming tools throughout the negotiation process, the GEF has contributed to gender-responsive budgeting and strengthened gender-responsive policies and legal frameworks across all clusters and sectors.

The GEF approach, based on both horizontal and vertical cooperation, and partnerships with gender mechanisms and governmental structures responsible for the integration process, has enhanced stakeholder engagement and empowerment.

UN Women, with its triple mandate of normative support, UN system coordination, and operational activities, is uniquely positioned to provide technical assistance to countries in transposing the EU acquis into national legislation and policy. This includes facilitating gender mainstreaming throughout the process, supporting sustainable capacity building, and amplifying women's voices and participation in decision-making.

With expertise gained from previous GEF implementations, UN Women combines its knowledge of EU integration processes with sectoral gender mainstreaming, the use of gender statistics, and comprehensive gender assessments and analyses. This approach ensures effective stakeholder engagement, promotes regional and transnational cooperation, and leverages global normative frameworks on gender equality.

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<sup>1</sup> All references to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999)

## 1.1. Albania

### Expected Outcomes and Results

The first phase of the Gender Equality Facility (GEF) was implemented over 18 months, from May 2015 to October 2016, funded by the Austrian Development Agency (ADA) and UN Women. GEF provided technical assistance to the Albanian government in absorbing the EU Gender Equality (GE) acquis, ensuring equal benefits for both women and men in the EU accession process.

GEF worked closely with the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), Ministry of EU Integration (MEI), and the EU Delegation (EUD), leading to an increase in gender-sensitive indicators for national development goals. GEF also influenced nine EU IPA programming documents to incorporate gender mainstreaming and gender-responsive budgeting. Additionally, GEF developed the "Gender Brief Albania 2016" to guide development and integration actors. The project supported the Albanian School for Public Administration (ASPA) in developing gender mainstreaming training modules for public servants. At the local level, six municipalities signed the European Charter for Equality between Women and Men, with four drafting and approving Local Gender Action Plans.

From 2021 to 2023, the EU for Gender Equality Project, implemented by UN Women and UNFPA in Albania, operated at both central and local levels. It focused on integrating EU Directives and global gender equality norms into sector reforms, programmes, and strategies. At the central level, several strategic and planning documents were reviewed, with concrete recommendations provided for gender mainstreaming. Additionally, gender mainstreaming tools were developed in five policy areas, and exchanges between central-level officials across the Western Balkans were facilitated. Significant progress was made, including gender reviews of key national strategies and action plans. At the local level, five municipalities developed and approved Local Gender Action Plans and were supported in creating gender-responsive youth development plans. Furthermore, 180 women participated in gender-sensitive value chain interventions, enhancing the economic activities in which women are engaged and increasing overall women's resilience in four municipalities/administrative units.

Building on the success of the EU for Gender Equality Project, UN Women is finalizing a second phase of the intervention. This phase will aim to increase the number of municipalities signing the European Charter, strengthen gender mainstreaming tools at both central and local levels, and enhance the use of gender data for decision-making and reporting in line with EUROSTAT and SDG indicators.

### Best Practices and Lessons Learned

The Gender Equality Facility (GEF) in Albania showcased several best practices and valuable lessons that can inform future gender equality initiatives. One of the key successes was GEF's close collaboration with national institutions, such as the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and the EU Delegation (EUD), ensuring that gender mainstreaming became a priority at the highest levels of government. Capacity building through the development of gender mainstreaming training modules for public servants equipped them with the tools necessary to embed gender equality principles within public administration.

Exchange visits allowed participants to share best practices and learn from experiences in implementing gender equality initiatives, fostering knowledge transfer and inspiring new approaches to gender mainstreaming in Albania. The EU for Gender Equality in Albania demonstrated significant successes through continuous mentoring, which enabled the integration of gender analysis into local policies. This resulted in tangible outcomes, such as gender-responsive action plans and women's economic empowerment initiatives. Expanding gender mainstreaming to non-traditional sectors, such as disaster risk reduction, digitalization, and ICT, provided policymakers with the knowledge and tools to apply gender mainstreaming across a broader range of sectors.

Gender-sensitive value chain analysis and development helped identify solutions that improve sectoral productivity, reduce gender-specific barriers to women's full economic participation, and promote equality between women and men. Strong coordination between UN agencies, including the establishment of a Steering Committee, ensured alignment with the EU Gender Equality acquis and national priorities.



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## 1.2. Serbia

### Expected Outcomes and Results

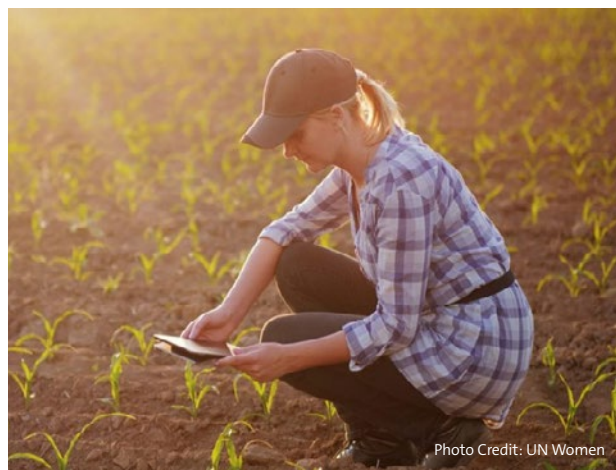
The Gender Equality Facility (GEF) in Serbia strengthens the country's administrative capacities to meet gender equality standards, with a focus on aligning national policies with the EU Gender Equality Acquis. It operates across three key dimensions: supporting the National Gender Machinery to increase knowledge and capacity for implementing gender equality and women's empowerment standards, including its coordination role in integrating gender perspectives across all public policies and budgets to improve the position of women in Serbia; supporting women's CSOs in alignment with national priorities set by gender equality policies; and providing technical advisory and capacity-building for gender mainstreaming in the EU accession process, including IPA programming.

GEF provided support to the Ministry of European Integration to incorporate gender perspectives into the programming, implementation, monitoring, and reporting of IPA programmes. It also supported Line Ministries in planning, implementing, monitoring, and reporting on international commitments and national policies related to gender equality and women's rights, through annual capacity-building meetings and direct work on IPA documents. This work was conducted in parallel with the production of numerous sectoral gender analyses.

With GEF's support, the National Gender Machinery developed several strategic and legislative documents, including the Law on Gender Equality (GE), the Law on Anti-Discrimination, and the National Strategy for Gender Equality. Additionally, GEF contributed to the development of a Gender Equality Impact Test to screen laws and regulations against gender equality standards. Documents such as the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina's Development Plan were also gender mainstreamed.

### Best Practices and Lessons Learned

Key results include the integration of gender equality and women's rights into the National Assistance Planning Document, as well as their inclusion in the Sector Planning Document and Strategic Response. Over the course of six consecutive years, annual reviews of the IPA AD were conducted, leading to the development of a Gender Annex for these documents. Gender mainstreaming was also incorporated into cross-border cooperation (CBC) operational programmes involving Bosnia and Herzegovina,



Montenegro, and North Macedonia, while IPA III operational programmes similarly underwent gender mainstreaming. Additionally, a gender review of the Council of Europe/EU Horizontal Facility was completed, and rules and procedures for IPA programming now include gender equality.

The Central Body for Gender Equality (CBGE) participated in all Sector Working Groups, ensuring that gender equality was consistently addressed in these meetings. GEF also supported municipalities in developing and implementing Local Gender Equality Action Plans. Flexibility in programming proved essential in navigating legislative and institutional delays, ensuring continued progress in gender equality efforts. Building long-term capacity for government institutions and rural CSOs is crucial for sustaining gender mainstreaming.

Strategic partnerships between government bodies, including the Ministry of European Integration and UN Women, were key to advancing gender equality across sectors. Synergies between local and national actors helped reach vulnerable women, while continuous public advocacy campaigns were vital in raising awareness and influencing societal norms on gender issues.

Throughout its support to the National Gender Machinery, GEF provided technical guidance and expert support in drafting the National Strategy for Gender Equality 2021-2030, along with its accompanying Action Plans, the Law on Gender Equality, and amendments to the Anti-Discrimination Law. Through this project, 19 municipalities received grants to implement measures from Local Gender Action Plans, and 16 women's CSOs were supported to improve their knowledge and skills in various fields. These CSOs also received direct support for developing their businesses, benefiting women from rural areas, Roma women, and/or unemployed women.

## 1.3. Bosnia and Herzegovina

### Expected Outcomes and Results

The Gender Equality Facility (GEF) project in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) focuses on enhancing institutional mechanisms for gender equality and integrating gender perspectives into EU pre-accession processes. The expected outcome is that key personnel and institutional mechanisms responsible for gender equality and European integration will perform their mandates more efficiently. This involves strengthening the capacities of gender institutional mechanisms such as the Agency for Gender Equality of BiH (AGE BiH), the Gender Centre of the Federation of BiH (FBiH), the Gender Centre of Republika Srpska, the FBiH Government Office for European Integration, and the Directorate for European Integration.

Key activities include conducting gender analyses of various Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) documents, developing a comprehensive Gender Country Profile, and providing technical support through workshops and trainings for civil servants across BiH. The project has also facilitated dialogues and knowledge exchanges with regional and international counterparts, contributing to better alignment with EU gender equality standards.

The project further aims to improve the inclusion of gender perspectives in institutional and policy processes. Expected results include enhanced knowledge and skills among over 90 civil servants and 45 representatives of civil society organizations in gender mainstreaming, as well as the development of sector-specific guidelines and reports on gender mainstreaming in IPA programming. Additionally, the GEF is expected to advance the implementation and monitoring of the BiH Gender Action Plan by supporting the establishment of gender-sensitive statistical data systems and promoting public awareness campaigns. These efforts are designed to ensure that gender equality is effectively integrated into BiH's EU integration and policy planning processes, with an overall impact of increased compliance with international gender equality commitments. The launch of the first Gender Equality Index for BiH has been achieved under the GEF project<sup>2</sup>.

### Best Practices and Lessons Learned

The GEF in Bosnia and Herzegovina underscored the importance of early involvement of key institutions to ensure alignment and ownership among stakeholders. Active engagement of the Steering Committee enhanced transparency and accountability, while continuous communication through traditional media, social platforms, and bulletins kept stakeholders informed and involved. The use of innovative capacity-building methods, such as interactive small group sessions and mentoring, improved training outcomes. Additionally, the sectoral approach, which aligned gender mainstreaming efforts with ministerial plans, contributed to more effective integration and tangible results.

Early stakeholder engagement is crucial for project success and minimizing conflicts. Strong leadership is essential to navigate diverse interests and maintain project coherence. An active Steering Committee enhances transparency and accountability, while continuous, varied communication strategies keep stakeholders informed and engaged. Innovative training methods boost participation, and aligning sectoral priorities with ministerial plans is vital for effective gender mainstreaming. Extending project timelines to align with broader processes enhances long-term impact.



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<sup>2</sup> Gender Equality Indexes were also developed for other EU accession countries: Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia.

## 1.4. North Macedonia

### Expected Outcomes and Results

The first phase of the Gender Equality Facility (GEF) project in North Macedonia began in December 2020 and concluded in September 2023. The second phase commenced in October 2023 and will continue until 2027.

Since October 2023, the GEF project in North Macedonia operates under Outcome II of the Gender Responsive Governance Programme, titled: The key EU integration institutions transpose the EU Gender Equality Acquis into legislation and strategic documents. Under Outcome II, the programme offers a comprehensive and synergistic approach to EU accession, IPA programming, and implementation, fostering collaboration between relevant stakeholders at both national and regional levels. It provides gender mainstreaming expertise to advance national legislative, strategic, policy, and negotiation frameworks in alignment with the EU Gender Equality Acquis. Additionally, it supports capacity building within EU/IPA national structures and public administration bodies to ensure inter-institutional cooperation on gender equality, sustainability of results, and local ownership of processes.

A notable outcome has been the significant improvement in the work of the Secretariat for EU Affairs (now Ministry for EU Affairs) and other relevant institutions in mainstreaming gender into the alignment process with the EU Gender Acquis. This includes the development of guidance notes and sectoral gender gap analyses, integrating gender perspectives across ten sectors.

During its first phase (December 2020 – September 2023), the GEF project focused on building sustainable gender-responsive governance, strengthening public administration capacities, and creating a comprehensive knowledge base to inform gender equality policymaking. Key results include the creation of a Country Gender Equality Profile, advancements in gender data collection, analysis, and dissemination of gender-disaggregated data, and progress in gender equality across various sectors such as public administration reform, justice, climate change, and others. Through GEF's support, a Gender Data Platform was launched to advance work on gender indicators and the presentation of gender statistics. Additionally, two publications, *Women and Men (2022 and 2023)*, were prepared. Over 80 IPA representatives received basic training on gender mainstreaming, and



24 IPA coordinators from various institutions in North Macedonia completed advanced technical training on gender mainstreaming in IPA-related processes.

The project also initiated collaborations with other institutions and organized study visits to enhance knowledge-sharing on gender mainstreaming, while contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 5 on gender equality.

### Best Practices and Lessons Learned

The GEF in North Macedonia successfully employed a multi-stakeholder engagement approach, involving diverse actors such as government ministries, civil society organizations (CSOs), and sector working groups to strengthen gender mainstreaming efforts. The project effectively adapted to political changes by utilizing risk assessments and strategies to maintain progress. Virtual collaboration during the COVID-19 pandemic ensured the continuity of activities. Institutional capacity building—through training centers and the promotion of gender-disaggregated data usage—was a key strength. Additionally, the project enhanced visibility by using videos, infographics, social media posts, and even billboards to make gender equality knowledge more accessible.

The project highlighted the importance of flexibility and risk management, particularly in navigating political and social instability. Maintaining institutional memory through continuous technical collaboration was essential for sustainability. Ongoing support for gender mainstreaming in alignment with EU standards was crucial, especially in the context of EU accession. The use of technology for virtual collaboration proved highly effective during crises, and engaging a wide range of stakeholders, including youth and CSOs, enhanced inclusivity. Communication tools like infographics played a key role in raising awareness and promoting gender equality.



## 1.5. Kosovo\*

### Expected Outcomes and Results

The Gender Equality Facility (GEF) in Kosovo aims to strengthen the capacity of the Kosovo administration to align with the EU Gender Equality acquis, focusing on socio-economic development for women, men, girls, and boys. Notable achievements include the establishment of gender-responsive budgeting, with a dedicated working group formed by the Government of Kosovo in 2023 to incorporate gender provisions into laws and public finance processes. At the local level, 18 municipalities are actively implementing gender mainstreaming, with 13 municipalities already endorsing local gender action plans. These efforts align with both the European Charter for Equality and Kosovo's national gender equality framework, reflecting progress in enhancing gender equality mechanisms and policy development at both central and local levels.

Significant advancements have been made in building the capacity of public officials, with over 40 officials trained on gender mainstreaming in EU integration and IPA programming. The Agency for Gender Equality has played a central role in integrating the gender perspective into national strategies and legal frameworks. This includes the Kosovo Program for Gender Equality and its action plan, as well as several key laws such as the Law on Public Officers, the draft Law on Foreign Trade, and the review of the Action Plan for Gender Equality of the Kosovo Programme for Gender Equality (KPGE). It also addresses Gender Equality and Public Procurement, and Artificial Intelligence and Gender Equality. UN Women has provided essential technical expertise in this effort. The GEF has also played a critical role in aligning EU Action documents and EU-funded projects implemented by Civil Society Organizations with the European Union Gender Action Plan III, ensuring that gender concerns are integrated into Kosovo's development agenda. Progress is anticipated to accelerate in 2024 and 2025, with a continued emphasis on gender mainstreaming at the municipal level and sector reforms.

### Best Practices and Lessons Learned

The GEF in Kosovo successfully fostered multi-level stakeholder engagement, particularly through the establishment of a dedicated working group composed of public institutions, civil society, and development partners. Gender-responsive budgeting was a notable achievement, with the Ministry of Finance incorporating relevant provisions into key legislation. Local-level gender mainstreaming also saw progress, with seventeen municipalities committing to align their policies with the European Charter for Equality. Workshops and training further strengthened local capacities, contributing to a gradual improvement in gender equality practices across various sectors.

Top-down commitments, paired with strong local engagement, proved essential in advancing gender mainstreaming. The provision of technical support from UN Women was instrumental in embedding gender perspectives into legal frameworks and policies. Flexibility in sector reforms allowed gender-responsive actions to adapt to changing national and international contexts. However, the lack of robust gender-disaggregated data systems underscored the need for stronger mechanisms to track progress. Cross-sectoral collaboration between public institutions, civil society, and development partners was key to achieving sustainable gender mainstreaming outcomes.



Photo Credit: UN Women

## 2. GEF in Eastern Partnership Countries

On 23 June 2022, based on the Commission's opinion on their applications for EU membership, Ukraine and Moldova were granted candidate status, while Georgia was given a European perspective. Subsequently, on 14 December 2023, Georgia was granted candidate status by the European Council, contingent upon the relevant steps outlined in the Commission's recommendation of 8 November 2023 being taken. On 25 June 2024, the opening of accession negotiations via the first Intergovernmental Conferences marked a key milestone for Moldova and Ukraine. This also serves as proof of the immense progress both nations have made on their journey toward European integration, despite the significant challenges they have faced and continue to face.

EU integration presents opportunities to address the challenges faced by Eastern Partnership countries and accelerate gender equality policies through the transposition of the EU acquis and regional cooperation. The GEF approach, which has successfully expanded to all sectors and clusters,<sup>3</sup> particularly contributes to areas such as the Women, Peace, and Security agenda, women's economic empowerment, the care economy, fundamental rights, inclusivity, and opportunities arising from the green economy and digitalization.

In the "[Recovery, Resilience, and Reform: Post-2020 Eastern Partnership Priorities](#)," gender mainstreaming, gender-responsive budgeting, ensuring women's participation, and integrating a gender perspective have been strongly emphasized. Among the top targets for 2025 is investing in inclusive, gender-equal, and diverse societies, along with strategic communication.

In accordance with its triple mandate and within the framework of the GEF initiative, UN Women will provide robust support to Eastern Partnership countries in their EU integration processes to ensure that women and girls benefit from these developments. This includes assisting governments, public administrations, and civil society organizations in integrating gender equality and women's empowerment (GEWE) into policy and legislation development and implementation throughout the EU integration process.

<sup>3</sup> Following the introduction of the revised methodology for accession negotiations in February 2020, negotiating chapters are now divided into six thematic clusters: Fundamentals, Internal Market, Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth, Green Agenda and Sustainable Connectivity, Resources, Agriculture and Cohesion, and External Relations.

### 2.1. Ukraine

- **Programming:** Under the GEF, Ukraine's programming focuses on embedding gender-responsive policies into its Recovery Agenda and aligning national frameworks with EU gender equality standards such as CEDAW, UNSCR 1325, and the EU Gender Action Plan III. This includes adapting recovery plans to integrate gender equality principles at all government levels and enhancing technical support for aligning laws with EU standards. The approach also seeks to leverage synergies with existing projects, such as the EU4Gender Equality Reform Helpdesk Project, amidst the technical and resource challenges posed by the ongoing conflict.
- **Expected Outlook:** The outlook anticipates improved integration of gender equality within Ukraine's recovery and EU accession processes, leading to greater compliance with EU standards and more consistent gender mainstreaming. While the conflict's impact on gender inequalities and vulnerabilities is acknowledged, the approach aims to address these through a dual strategy: providing technical support for EU acquis adoption and enhancing public administration's capacity for gender mainstreaming. This is expected to strengthen Ukraine's alignment with EU gender equality norms and foster more equitable socio-economic development.
- **Strategic Visioning:** The strategic vision involves leveraging UN Women's expertise to accelerate progress in gender equality by focusing on the transposition of the EU Gender Equality acquis and integrating gender responsiveness into recovery efforts and socio-economic development. This vision includes aligning Ukraine's policies and practices with EU social and employment policies, aiming to create a more gender-responsive governance framework that supports long-term sustainable development and resilience.



## 2.2. Moldova

- **Programming:** The GEF will support Moldova in integrating EU gender equality provisions into national and local governance frameworks. This includes providing technical assistance and capacity building to key institutions, such as government ministries and municipal authorities, to effectively absorb and implement EU gender equality directives. The program aligns with Moldova's Programme for Ensuring Gender Equality and the EU Country Level Implementation Plan (CLIP), focusing on improving gender-responsive governance and policy frameworks.
- **Expected Outlook:** The GEF is anticipated to significantly enhance Moldova's capacity for gender mainstreaming across all sectors, leading to more equitable socio-economic development outcomes. The action will improve gender policy implementation, strengthen institutional mechanisms, and support local authorities in delivering gender-responsive services. The program aims to address gender-specific socio-economic challenges, including those exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, thereby contributing to greater gender equality and empowerment.
- **Strategic Visioning:** The strategic vision of the GEF is to foster long-term, transformative change by embedding gender equality principles into Moldova's governance structures and processes. The initiative will build on UN Women's experience to create a unified approach to gender mainstreaming, enhancing Moldova's alignment with EU standards and international norms. The GEF also aims to engage civil society organizations, improve gender data availability, and support inclusive development, ultimately contributing to Sustainable Development Goal 5 and a more equitable society.

## 2.3. Georgia

- **Programming:** In December 2023, Georgia received EU candidate status. This milestone, along with the release of the European Commission's 2023 report on Georgia,<sup>4</sup> has opened up opportunities for more active discussions and advocacy efforts toward inclusive and gender-responsive public policy processes and reforms. However, recent political developments in Georgia, triggered by the reintroduction of the so-called "foreign agents" bill, pose a grave threat to Georgia's progress toward EU approximation. If the environment is enabling, UN Women's GEF in Georgia will continue to prioritize the mainstreaming of gender in good governance, gender-responsive and family-friendly employment policies, and the promotion of the care economy.
- **Expected Outlook:** The GEF is anticipated to make gender mainstreaming a key crosscutting consideration in Georgia's EU accession discussions and negotiations. Even before EU accession negotiations start, there is room to continue engagement with state and non-state partners towards improved implementation of relevant EU acquis, especially regarding economic rights within the framework of Georgia's Association Agreement with the EU.
- **Strategic Visioning:** The strategic vision for the GEF in Georgia is to leverage the EU accession process for enhanced gender mainstreaming and, ultimately, improved gender equality and women's empowerment. The GEF provides a set of tools and approaches that operationalize gender mainstreaming in EU approximation processes to enable gender-transformative results. This is achieved through inclusive and empowering practices that build capacity, provide technical support, generate evidence and data, and nurture multi-stakeholder engagement and dialogue around gender equality and women's empowerment issues.

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<sup>4</sup> European Commission, *Georgia 2023 Report*. Available at: <https://bit.ly/4eLcdma>

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