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Women as agents of change: EU support to women as peacebuilders in the
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Abstract

By recognising women as more than just victims of conflict, a space is created for women to be *agents of change* through inclusion in (post-)conflict peacebuilding processes. In this research, the EU's discourse and initiatives to support the inclusion of women as peacebuilders in the Tigray War (2020-2022) in Ethiopia are examined. Situated at the intersection of feminist peacebuilding theory, feminist critiques of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda and debates on Normative Power Europe, this thesis utilises Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) (Lazar, 2005) to understand framings of empowerment, gender and peacebuilding in relevant EU sources. The findings demonstrate that the EU has supported women as peacebuilders to a certain degree in the context of the Tigray War. Nevertheless, there are several shortcomings and room for development. The EU's approach remains partly constrained by its own normative agendas, and its praise for the WPS agenda. While the EU's discourse overall promotes the empowerment of women, this research has made some critical observations that EU actions in the field do not always align with the feminist principles of transformative empowerment and sustainable peace. This research contributes to Critical Feminist Peace and Conflict Studies (CFPCS), and more specifically Feminist Peacebuilding, by giving agency to women in (post-)conflict situations, and by analysing the EU as a global promotor of gender norms.

Keywords: women, peacebuilding, EU, Tigray, Ethiopia, feminist peacebuilding theory, WPS agenda, Normative Power Europe

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Abstract (Deutsch)

Indem Frauen nicht nur als Opfer von Konflikten anerkannt werden, sondern auch als Akteure des Wandels, wird ihnen durch ihre Einbeziehung in (Post-)Konflikt-Friedensprozesse ein Raum geschaffen. In dieser Forschungsarbeit werden die Diskurse und Initiativen der EU zur Unterstützung der Einbeziehung von Frauen als Friedensstifterinnen im Tigray-Krieg (2020–2022) in Äthiopien untersucht. An der Schnittstelle zwischen feministischer Friedensförderungstheorie, feministischer Kritik an der Agenda „Frauen, Frieden und Sicherheit“ (WPS) und Debatten über die normative Macht Europas nutzt diese Arbeit die feministische kritische Diskursanalyse (FCDA) (Lazar, 2005), um die Darstellung von Empowerment, Geschlecht und Friedensförderung in relevanten EU-Quellen zu verstehen. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die EU Frauen als Friedensstifterinnen im Kontext des Tigray-Krieges bis zu einem gewissen Grad unterstützt hat. Dennoch gibt es einige Mängel und Entwicklungsmöglichkeiten. Der Ansatz der EU bleibt teilweise durch ihre eigenen normativen Agenden und ihr Lob für die WPS-Agenda eingeschränkt. Während der Diskurs der EU insgesamt die Stärkung von Frauen fördert, hat diese Forschung einige kritische Beobachtungen gemacht, dass die Maßnahmen der EU in diesem Bereich nicht immer mit den feministischen Prinzipien der transformativen Stärkung und des nachhaltigen Friedens übereinstimmen. Diese Forschung leistet einen Beitrag zu den Critical Feminist Peace and Conflict Studies (CFPCS) und insbesondere zur feministischen Friedensförderung, indem sie Frauen in (Post-)Konfliktsituationen Handlungsfähigkeit verleiht und die EU als globale Förderin von Geschlechternormen analysiert.

Stichworte: Frauen, Friedensförderung, EU, Tigray, Äthiopien, feministische Friedensförderungstheorie, WPS-Agenda, Normative Power Europe

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This master's thesis is the summum of my masters in Global Studies, which has transformed my curiosity about the world into a deeper understanding of how global issues impact local realities. The opportunities, international dimension and friendships I have experienced over the past 2 years have shown me that anything is possible, and that an understanding of context and nuance is important.

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List of Abbreviations

AU	African Union
ACP	African, Caribbean and Pacific
APSA	African Peace and Security Architecture
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CECOE	Coalition of Ethiopian Civil Society Organisations for Elections
CFPCS	Critical Feminist Peace and Conflict Studies
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CLIP	Country Level Implementation Plan
CoHA	Cessation of Hostilities Agreement
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
CWVND	Coalition for Women's Voices in the National Dialogue
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration
DEVE	Committee on Development (EP)
DG-ECHO	Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
EC	European Commission
EDF	Eritrean Defence Force
EEAS	European External Action Service
ELiDA	Empathy for Life Integrated Development Association
ENDF	Ethiopian National Defence Force
EP	European Parliament
EU	European Union
EUGS	European Union Global Strategy
EUMS	European Union Military Staff
EWPB	Ethiopian Women's Peace Builders
EWHRDN	Ethiopian Women Human Rights Defenders Network
FCDA	Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis
FDRE	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
FEMM	Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (EP)
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
GAP I, II, III	Gender Action Plans I, II, III
GEWE	Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment
HIP	Humanitarian Implementation Plan
HoA	Horn of Africa
HR	High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy
HTP	Harmful Traditional Practices
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
MIP	Multiannual Indicative Programme
NDICI	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe
NIP	National Indicative Programme
NIMD	Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy

NPE	Normative Power Europe
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
TDF	Tigrayan Defence Forces
THCO	Tinsae Humanitarian Charity Organization
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
UN	United Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
WPS	Women, Peace and Security

Introduction

Without the full participation of women in society, neither peace nor prosperity can be ensured over the long term. (UN 2018: 7-8)

For four months, I had the opportunity to study and live in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia.¹ At the Institute for Peace and Security Studies (IPSS), I learned about conflicts in the Horn of Africa (HoA) from different Ethiopian perspectives instead of predominantly European perspectives. I learned about theories and approaches regarding peace and security studies, peacebuilding, -making, -keeping, and mediation, which are often overly male-dominated (Anderson et al., 2025; Shepherd, 2017; Väyrynen et al., 2021).

In Ethiopia, the most recent and internationally known conflict is the Tigray War, also called the Northern Ethiopia Conflict or Tigray Conflict, which officially lasted from 3 November 2020 until 3 November 2022. This war was between the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) supported by Eritrea, and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The Tigray War is well-known for the widespread prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). There is no denying of the extent of SGBV throughout the conflict, since numbers show that 40-50% percent of the women and girls during the war have experienced SGBV (Fisseha et al., 2023). One dominant narrative about the Tigray War is that women and children are usually seen as the main group of disproportionately affected victims, through sexual harassment and violence, femicide, and displacement (Salama Hub, 2023). Nevertheless, women are not consulted regularly in (post-)conflict peace processes, mediation or long-term peacebuilding. This tendency is also visible in Ethiopia: although 51,8 percent of the Ethiopian population are women, they are hardly included in official peace processes (Hailu et al., 2024). According to a study in 2019 by the Council of Foreign Relations, women were only involved

¹ As part of the Erasmus Mundus master's programme in Global Studies, we had the opportunity to study at the Institute for Peace and Security Studies (IPSS) which is part of Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia.

in 9,5 percent of peace processes and agreements between 1992 and 2019 worldwide, which shows that this underrepresentation is not merely an Ethiopian issue (Salama Hub, 2023).²

Women's portrayal as vulnerable victims during the Tigray War fits within the global victimhood narrative of women's roles during conflict and is frequently supported by media and academic scholarship. Nevertheless, women in conflict are more than just victims, and can play many more roles in conflict as combatants, mediators, peacebuilders and overall, as *agents of change*. One understudied dimension in the Tigray war is the role of women in (post-)conflict peace processes and peacebuilding. The inclusion of women in peacebuilding, both during and after conflict, is increasingly recognised as essential in academic literature (Aggestam & Eitrem Holmgren, 2022; Beyene, 2024; O'Reilly, 2024; O'Reilly et al., 2015; Paffenholz et al., 2015; Väyrynen et al., 2021). A research project comparing 40 peace processes around the world since the Cold War found that peace agreements were almost always reached when women were included (Paffenholz, 2015b, 2015a, 2015c). The positive impact of women on the outcome of peace processes is due to, among other things, their ability to form coalitions, reach consensus, and address the root causes of conflicts.

The constant victimisation of women diminishes their agency (Salama Hub, 2023). If women play such a considerable role as victims in conflicts, why should they not play an equally important role as agents of change in peacebuilding? Integrating the perspectives of women, who are often victimised, could lead to new insights on how to solve conflicts, and how to build a sustainable peace. This aligns with feminist peacebuilding theory, which is a reaction on more conventional and masculine peacebuilding models like liberal peacebuilding. The foundation of feminist peacebuilding theory is an awareness of underlying power dynamics, structural inequality, colonial stereotypes, and epistemic injustice. To achieve a lasting and transformative peace, it stresses gender equity and centres women as agents, challenging, dominant, top-down, and frequently male-dominated ideas of peace, conflict, and post-conflict reconstruction (Cockburn, 2007; Cohn, 2013; Enloe, 2014; Mama, 1995, 2005; Shepherd, 2013, 2016, 2021).

Although institutions often follow the liberal peacebuilding paradigm instead of feminist peacebuilding, they could help shift the narrative by promoting women's representation in post-conflict reconstruction efforts. There are many regional, national and international institutions

² This study analysed 42 peace processes and agreements in the period 1992-2019 across the globe.

which can and should empower women as peacebuilders in Ethiopia. One institution that could be proactive in enhancing gender equality in peacebuilding processes in Ethiopia is the European Union (EU). An analysis of the EU's perspective allows me to critically examine how the EU interacts with Ethiopia, specifically regarding the support to women as peacebuilders in Ethiopia. Although Ethiopia has formally not been colonised, the broader colonial history of key European powers in Africa complicates the EU's current role in Africa.³ On the one hand, the role of the EU as a supporter is welcomed. On the other hand, several governments of African countries do not want the EU to interfere with any of the internal politics and view the EU's engagement with the region as overly normative, patronising or even neocolonial. The EU struggles to find a balance between these two visions and faces the challenge of positioning itself as a partner that can effectively promote gender equality, without interfering excessively in local governance.

Problem statement and research questions

The Tigray War (2020-2022) ended with the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA), more commonly called the Pretoria Agreement. While women are generally seen as the main victims of this conflict, they were not equally represented at the negotiation table during the peacemaking and- building processes (Salama Hub, 2023; Siha Network, 2025).

The main body of this research examines the role of the EU as a promotor of women's involvement in peace processes in the Tigray War. Through a feminist-layered lens, the EU's current interaction with the region is examined. Analysing the role and current position of the EU towards gender equality and the inclusion of women in peacebuilding in Tigray uncovers the EU's stance, possible stereotypes and norms.

Main research questions

- 1) What role has the European Union (EU) played in promoting the participation of women as peacebuilders during and after the Tigray War (2020–2022)?

³ I am aware of the fact that Europe, European states and the EU are not the same units of analysis. Therefore, it cannot be stated that the EU as a whole has been a coloniser.

- 2) How effective have EU-supported initiatives been in empowering Ethiopian women to participate in peacebuilding related to the Tigray War?

Sub-questions

This research employs the EU's discourse as an analytical lens across multiple dimensions. The **first dimension**, the foundation, is the most practical one, and researches the representation of women in peace processes. The **second dimension**, the main body of this thesis, serves to understand the role of the EU in supporting women as peacebuilders, and leads to a range of sub-questions directly related to the EU's discourse.

- A. How does the EU frame women's roles in peacebuilding in Ethiopia?
- B. How is "empowerment" defined in EU-supported programs? Does it reflect a transformative or instrumental approach, and how does this approach reflect feminist peacebuilding principles?
- C. How can the EU improve its initiatives in empowering Ethiopian women as peacebuilders?

These sub-questions function as guiding inquiries within the framework of the two overarching research questions. The **third dimension** is on a more holistic level and formulates recommendations regarding the inclusion of more women in peacebuilding processes and the EU's role as a supporter of women's inclusion.

This research is conducted within the framework of Critical Feminist Peace and Conflict Studies (CFPCS), using Feminist Peacebuilding Theory as the main analytical lens. Additionally, feminist critique of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda provides a normative perspective through the EU's policy. Finally, to critically examine how the EU frames and legitimises its involvement in peacebuilding processes, particularly regarding gender and women's participation, this thesis draws on Ian Manners' concept of *Normative Power Europe* (NPE) (2002). Thus, the thesis assesses the EU's role in supporting women as peacebuilders in Tigray, paying attention to how the EU discursively constructs peace, gender and its own role as a normative actor.

Research aims and significance of the study

This research explores the role of the EU in promoting women as peacebuilders during and after the Tigray War in Ethiopia. It examines not only the discourse in the EU's policies regarding women as peacebuilders in Tigray; rather it puts into question the EU's perspectives on and interaction with Ethiopia as a whole, its perspective on gender equality and the inclusion of women in decision-making processes. Specifically, this research aims to:

- Understand the discourse of the EU related to promoting women as peacebuilders during and after the Tigray War (2020-2022) from a feminist perspective;
- Understand the underlying power structures that define why the EU takes on a specific role, and how this role is perceived of by local actors;
- Underline the importance of including women in peacebuilding efforts and embrace them as agents of change rather than mere victims.

This provides the reader with new insights in the importance of promoting gender equality, and the inclusion of women in (post-)conflict contexts in peace processes. It challenges dominant conceptions which often essentialise women, and mainstreams the idea that women play diverse roles in conflict. It is important to go beyond perceiving women merely as the victims of conflict and provide them the space to become agents of change through inclusion in (post-)conflict peace processes. On a more theoretical level, it challenges the traditional Liberal Peacebuilding model and adds to Female Peacebuilding Theory and feminist analyses of EU policy documents. Furthermore, it has policy relevance for international peacebuilding actors. By applying a feminist-layered lens, this study aims to provide recommendations to transform global power dynamics that currently favour more traditional security perspectives.

Methodological overview

This research follows a qualitative approach. Using Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) (Lazar, 2005), this research examines how the different institutions of the EU define women's involvement in Ethiopian peacebuilding, especially in light of the Tigray War (2020-2022). To determine if the EU institutions are promoting transformative feminist peace or

reinforcing liberal and postcolonial paradigms, I will examine the framing, presumptions and silences present in policy documents, resolutions, EU strategic frameworks, statements and Actions plans of the European Parliament (EP), European Commission (EC), the Council of the EU (the Council) and the European External Action Service (EEAS). The EU's *Gender Action Plan III* (GAP III) as well as the *EU's Strategic Approach to Women, Peace, and Security* (WPS) are essential documents in this analysis. It is important to bear in mind the nature of these EU policy documents, as they always reflect the viewpoints and underlying bias of the different EU institutions. This is precisely why FCDA is a useful method.

Furthermore, to counter the top-down narrative of EU policy documents, reports from Ethiopian CSOs and think tanks, such as the Network of Ethiopian Women's Associations (NEWA), the Ethiopian Women Peace Builders (EWPB) network and Ethiopian Women Human Rights Defenders Network (EWHRDN) will be used. Finally, an extensive literature review will provide the reader with the necessary contextual foundation to better understand, grasp and connect the empirical material to the theoretical framework. Authors responsible for this feminist-layered framework, Feminist Peacebuilding and Ethiopia, are commonly used.

State of the art

The debate about the gendered nature of war, peace and peacebuilding has been going on for decades. However, the percentage of female participation in peace processes remains low (Paffenholz, 2015c; UN Women, 2015). On the one hand this thesis builds further on this more theoretical level debate. On the other hand, by using the case study of the Tigray War (2020-2022) and the EU's discourse regarding women as peacebuilders, it offers a more practical perspective that remains relatively underexplored.

Feminist perspectives on Peace and Conflict Studies are winning ground. Cynthia Cockburn (2001, 2007), Cynthia Enloe (2004, 2014), Amina Mama (1995, 2005), Carol Cohn (2008) and Laura Shepherd (2013, 2016, 2017) stress the importance of utilising a feminist lens in peacebuilding, and are thus the key authors cited in the theoretical framework regarding peacebuilding and feminist critique on the WPS agenda. McLeod & O'Reilly (2021) provide in their *Feminist interventions in critical peace and conflict studies* several perspectives on Feminist Peace and Conflict Studies (PCS), and in particular Feminist Peacebuilding. Similarly,

Väyrynen et al. (2021) also provide useful insights on feminist theories and peace research in their *Routledge Handbook of Feminist Peace Research*. Anderson et al. (2025) introduce the concept of a “peace continuum”, which challenges Liberal Peacebuilding Theory and binary approaches to peace and conflict. Aggestam & Eitrem Holgren (2022) focus on the gender-resilience nexus in peacebuilding and how this quest could lead to more sustainable peace. Furthermore, on general conceptions and definitions on peacebuilding, Roger Mac Ginty (2010, 2015) and Oliver Richmond (Richmond, 2002, 2005, 2011) provide useful overviews. Ian Manners (2002) understanding of the concept of *Normative Power Europe* is part of the main theoretical framework of this thesis, which puts the EU’s normative character into question.

Regarding the inclusion of women in peace processes, Marie O'Reilly, Andrea Ó Súilleabháin, and Thania Paffenholz (2015) address in their paper “Reimagining peacemaking: women’s role in peace processes” the fact that in (post-)conflict situations, belligerents often get a spot at the post-conflict negotiation table instead of women. They advocate for the inclusion of women at the decision-making table and propose different roles women can play in what they call *reimagined peace processes*. Thania Paffenholz et al. (2015) and other work of Paffenholz (2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d) has been thoroughly used in this research by assessing women's inclusion and influence on peace negotiations. Donna Pankhurst’s “The 'Sex War' and Other Wars: Towards a Feminist Approach to Peace Building” (2003) is widely cited because of her knowledge of gender stereotypes of women in conflict, and the barriers which make it difficult for women to participate. Björkdahl & Mannergren (2025) stress the importance of understanding epistemic power to acknowledge the gendered knowledge of war. Francesca Baldwin (2022, 2024) has important contributions regarding varying gender norms and sexual violence during the Tigray war.

About women in Ethiopia, Hailu et al. (2024) report “Determining the Ethiopian women's status & priorities” provides an extensive overview of the priorities, structural inequalities, needs and numbers of women in different regions. UN Women (2024) provides an overview of women’s status, priorities and engagement in peace processes in Ethiopia (and beyond). Nina Wilén’s (2022) contribution “Women, Gender and Peacebuilding in Africa” in *The Routledge handbook on African Peacebuilding* proved to be important to understand the specificities of peacebuilding and gender through her analysis of 130 peace agreements in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Literature about the normativity of the EU and the Tigray war starts with Francesca Caruso & Jesutimilehin O. Akamo's (2024) "EU Policy towards Ethiopia amidst the Tigray War: The limits of mitigating fragmentation" and Antoni Sastre Bel's (2025) "Exploring the EU's polyhedral peace mediation in Ethiopia and Sudan: can the EU be a suitable peacemaker?". Eva Luna Maes & Petra Debusscher (2022) analyse the EU's role as a global gender actor, by analysing the discursive framing of intersectionality in the EU's Gender Action Plans.

Structure of the thesis

Part I: RESEARCH FRAMEWORK deals with the theoretical and conceptual framework and the methodological approach. These two chapters are necessary as a basis to be able to understand the way this research is conducted.

Chapter 1 of the thesis lays out the theoretical and conceptual framework on which this research is based. The encompassing feminist-layered framework based on Feminist Peacebuilding theory, the WPS agenda and Feminist IR is explained here as a guiding line throughout this thesis to understand the EU's role as a possible normative actor in the region. **Chapter 2** deals with the methodology used to conduct this thesis research. Through a Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) of the main primary sources used in this thesis – EU policy documents – this chapter explains and critically frames the use of discourse analysis in research. Furthermore, a critical analysis of literature, source criticism, and positionality is shortly explained.

Part II: WOMEN, CONFLICT AND PEACEBUILDING: FROM THE GLOBAL TO TIGRAY explores the relation between women, conflict and peacebuilding on a global level by a literature review, before zooming in on this relation during the Tigray war (2020-2022).

Chapter 3 sketches the contextual background of this topic through a literature review based on *women and conflicts* through the case study of the Tigray War. It provides the reader with background on the traditional role of women in conflicts, gender norms and existing barriers for women to participate in peace processes.

PART III: EU POLICY, WOMEN AND PEACEBUILDING DURING AND AFTER THE TIGRAY WAR examines the discourse of different institutions of the EU regarding support to

women as peacebuilders in Tigray, and analyses whether this discourse aligns with the practical realities of EU's support.

Chapter 4 analyses the policy discourse of different EU institutions in support of women as peacebuilders in Ethiopia. Through a Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) of EU policy documents related to gender equality and supporting women as peacebuilders in Tigray, Ethiopia, the viewpoints of the EU are examined. **Chapter 5** maps the EU's initiatives in practice and brings together the findings from chapter 3 and 4. Through documents of Ethiopian Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and think tanks, the EU's role is critically questioned to see if the discourse of the EU matches its deeds. Following the theoretical framework (chapter 1) as a compass, the main research questions will be answered in this analysis. Ultimately, **chapter 6** assesses whether the EU's initiatives (chapter 5) align with its discourse (chapter 4) in a discussion.

Finally, all the findings of this research will be compiled in a comprehensive conclusion, in which recommendations for future EU engagement regarding women and peacebuilding in Ethiopia are formulated.

PART I: RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

1. Theoretical and conceptual framework

1.1. An encompassing, feminist-layered framework

In this chapter, the theoretical foundations of this thesis are assessed. An encompassing, feminist-layered framework bundles all the dimensions of this research to understand peacebuilding as a concept, the role of the EU in supporting women as peacebuilders and the international and gendered dimensions this entails. Building on **feminist peacebuilding theory**, **feminist critiques of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda** and Ian Manners' (2002) concept of **Normative Power Europe (NPE)**, this framework provides a critical perspective on how the EU shapes and promotes the participation of women in peace processes in the Tigray war (2020-2022) in Ethiopia. Furthermore, it shows the transformative potential of these efforts, and can help identify if the EU's support genuinely challenges the existing power dynamics and gender imbalances, or if it risks reinforcing them (Aggestam & Eitrem Holmgren, 2022).

On a broader level, this thesis is based on Critical Feminist Peace and Conflict Studies (CFPCS), an approach integrating feminist critiques of peacebuilding, international relations and institutional discourse to address structural inequalities and violence rooted in colonial systems, and to deconstruct hegemonic power dynamics within peacebuilding (Halunen, 2025). In this thesis, the explicitly *feminist* lens is important since it lays bare the androcentric nature of (critical) Peace and Conflict Studies, and places gender at the forefront as a main category of analysis (McLeod & O'Reilly, 2021). This thesis thus utilises the case of the Tigray war to understand whether the EU's intentions are transformative, or rather performative.

1.2. Feminist peacebuilding theory

The origins of Feminist peacebuilding theory can be traced back to critique on the more dominant, largely male-dominated conceptions of peace and conflict. Roger Mac Ginty (2025: 1), defines *peacebuilding* as “attempts to positively recalibrate social relations during and after

violent conflict”. The debates about theories in peacebuilding are rich in diversity and nature (Shepherd, 2017). Oliver Richmond (2005), situates four generations of peacebuilding:

“The first generation is derived from conflict management approaches that attempt to produce order without open violence by preserving the state and its relations. The second generation focuses on removing violence and injustice mainly for individuals. The third generation focuses on large scale, multidimensional approaches to creating peace. The fourth generation, yet barely expressed in theory or practice, seeks ways of dealing with conflict that would not result in its replication in various forms.” (Richmond, 2005: 87)

The liberal peacebuilding model, which fits the third generation, came up in the 1990s and has dominated the peacebuilding theory scene ever since (Richmond, 2005). The past decade this model came under pressure from scholars, activists, but also policymakers. The assumptions this model entails do not seem to fit the current changing world system anymore, since it is based on democracy, human rights and a globalized and a free-market economy (Doyle, 2005). If these pillars are in balance, they should lead to peace together (Jahn, 2018). Paffenholz (2021) points out that liberal peacebuilding theory follows the traditional steps of conflict-solving; a ceasefire, pre-and formal peace negotiations, a peace treaty and implementation. Although the idea of this model seems to be appealing, Anderson et al. (2025) state that it has failed to fulfil its promises.

Criticism on liberal peacebuilding includes the irrelevance of the model itself, to challenging the state-centric focus, militarised peace models and binary concepts of war and peace (Anderson et al., 2025; Väyrynen et al., 2021). Furthermore, feminist peace theorists have argued that these dominant models do not include women’s experiences and expertise when it comes to conflict (Väyrynen et al., 2021). This reinforces existing hegemonic hierarchies, often oversimplifies conflicts and essentializes all conflicts to the same order of conflict-solving. Hegemonic forces such as masculinity, whiteness, colonialism and western values are according to some scholars being reinforced through the dominant nature of liberal peacebuilding which keeps pattern of repression alive (Cárdenas, 2023; Jabri, 2013; O’Reilly, 2024; Polat, 2021). Chandler (2010) and Paffenholz (2021) point at the problematic linear nature of liberal peacebuilding and underline the importance of understanding the complexities and differences of conflict-affected regions. Paffenholz (2021) states that while peacebuilding is a dynamic process with a multiplicity of stances and entry-points, peacebuilding does not know an endpoint.

Different conceptions of peace have won ground the past decades, and structural violence and inequalities have been addressed in peace research to understand gendered dynamics and power hierarchies within peacebuilding research (Lyytikäinen et al., 2021; Väyrynen et al., 2021). To demarginalize feminist conceptions of peace studies, Väyrynen et al. (2021: 1) call for a “new, critical feminist peace research agenda which represents emerging, vibrant and cutting-edge approaches that are already providing significant academic and political innovation”. The marginalisation of women in peace and conflict issues, and the structural inequalities that lie at the basis of these gendered dynamics have become issues that can no longer be ignored, just like the need for an intersectional approach in peace and conflict research (Väyrynen et al., 2021).

Feminist peacebuilding theory thus starts from the premise of critiquing more traditional peacebuilding models such as liberal peacebuilding, and starts from an understanding of underlying power dynamics, structural inequality, colonial stereotypes and epistemic injustice. It challenges traditional, top-down and often male-dominated conceptions of peace, conflict and post-conflict reconstruction, and centres women as agents, emphasizes gender justice to become a sustainable and transformative peace. Drawing on works from Amina Mama, Carol Cohn, Cynthia Cockburn, Cynthia Enloe and Laura Shepherd, the main characteristics of feminist peacebuilding are outlined below.

1.2.1. The gendered logic of peacebuilding

Feminist peacebuilding theory starts from the premise that gender is not simply a descriptive category, but a power relation that shapes every part of peace and conflict. Gender is a relation of power which is produced and reproduces social processes. It is shaped by and is shaping social structures, and both women and men are responsible for participating and sustaining these patriarchal gendered hierarchies (Cockburn, 2007). Scholars such as Cynthia Enloe (2014, Cynthia Cockburn (2007) and Laura Shepherd (2013; 2017; 2021) explain how existing gender norms influence how conflict is perceived and how it affects stereotypes and participation. Laura Shepherd (2017) takes on an interdisciplinary perspective based on Peace Studies, Development Studies, International Relations, Anthropology and Economics, to understand how peace itself is an inherently gendered concept. Peacebuilding is not a neutral process, since it is embedded in social, economic, cultural, political and ideological structures based on structural inequalities. Feminist scholars critique the portrayal of women as inherently peaceful

and see this essentialisation as a limit to their participation which ranges from a symbolic role in peace processes, to full exclusion. In feminist peacebuilding, the main goal is to uncover how these gendered power hierarchies in relation to race, class, nationality etc. exist in war, peace, conflict, and actively challenge these hierarchies to become a more gender-equal version of peacebuilding.

In Cynthia Enloe's book (2014) "Bananas, beaches and bases: Making feminist sense of international politics", Enloe urges scholars to ask themselves: "where are the women?". In all layers of society, international politics, diplomacy and peacebuilding, women have been marginalised or even silenced. Feminist peacebuilding theorists have been challenging gendered hierarchies hidden within dominant peace frameworks.

Similarly, Carol Cohn (2008) is known for her feminist critique of security studies. By analysing "masculinist" language and logics in international security frameworks, Cohn tries to deconstruct dominant discourses which privilege masculine characteristics - such as strength, control and domination – and give a voice to marginalised or silenced actors to provide new and alternative visions on security issues. Cohn does this ultimately via an analysis of discursive practices and shows how language sustains masculine ways of thinking. By addressing this gendered nature, she tries to reframe dominant security paradigms - which are often sustained by institutions such as the EU - to become more gender-inclusive peacebuilding theories and practices. Amina Mama (1995) similarly critiques liberal peace interventions because of a lack of context-specific knowledge, ignoring local women's agency and norm diffusion regarding 'gender equality', which often erase indigenous knowledge. Together, these theorists urge for a new conceptualisation of peacebuilding that challenges militarised logics, and is attentive to informal, grassroots ways of peacebuilding.

1.2.2. Intersectionality and structural inequalities

At the heart of feminist peacebuilding theory lies the belief that structural inequalities should be confronted to transform into sustainable peace. A way to do so is via an intersectional lens (Anderson et al., 2025; Cockburn, 2007; Cohn, 2008; C. Enloe, 2004, 2014; Mama, 1995, 2005; Shepherd, 2017; Väyrynen, 2021). *Intersectionality*, a concept coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), is central to feminist peacebuilding theory. It relates gender to other identity markers, such as ethnicity, class, age, religion and sexual orientation. An intersectional analysis can help understand how women's contributions to peacebuilding are shaped by legacies of colonialism,

marginalisation, and ethno-political tensions. Feminist scholars such as Amina Mama (1995, 2005) and Srilatha Batliwala (2013) underline the importance of tackling these structural inequalities, rather than superficially adding a gender perspective. This intersectional approach shows how neoliberal economic frameworks, militarised political governance and international interventions influence rather than challenge the power imbalances that hinder inclusive peace.

Mama (1995) stresses how subjectivity is constantly changing and inextricably linked to discourse. She points out that identities and experiences are shaped by intersecting identity markers such as ethnicity, class, race, age, ability and history, instead of assuming one homogenous image of women. The same goes for women as peacebuilders and the very nature of peacebuilding initiatives, which are in many cases still rooted in stereotypes and top-down conceptions, and forget the many lived experiences and diversity in peacebuilding efforts on a more local, non-institutional, level. Similarly, Shepherd (2017) uses intersectionality to understand gendered power, conflict, peace and peacebuilding.

Following the premise of Richmond (2005) that approaches to ending conflict “should aim at a just distribution of political, social and economic resources, operate in a non-exclusionary manner, and export institutions, structures and norms that are welcomed and required by recipients” (Richmond, 2002: 191), Shepherd (2017) researches the gaps, silences and challenges in liberal peacebuilding. She stresses the importance of a contextual understanding of the structural inequalities and structural violence that lie at the base of peacebuilding practices. Similarly, Cynthia Enloe’s (2004) concept of “feminist curiosity” illustrates this perfectly: we need more feminist curiosity to question certain power structures and hidden dynamics of militarism, nationalism and politics on a global scale. Furthermore, feminist peacebuilding critically examines top-down peacebuilding efforts, and focuses more on local, grassroots, community-based efforts that are not always taken into consideration in liberal peacebuilding, which favours institutional forms of peace efforts.

1.2.3. Discourse, representation and women’s agency

The power of discourse is inextricably linked to feminist peacebuilding theory. Discourse is a central site of power and knowledge (re)production, which shapes the possibilities for women’s participation in peacebuilding processes. The representation of women by different actors can enforce stereotypes and can hinder their participation in peace processes. Stereotypes about and

essentialisation of women are commonplace in more dominant peacebuilding theories. African women, and in particular Black women, are often either portrayed as victims that need to be rescued, or as inherently peaceful, motherly figures. This reinforces paternalist approaches to peacebuilding. Mama (1995: 17) notes that:

White supremacy can thus be conceptualised as a set of discourses and practices that subjugated non-European people and cast them in the position of subjected Others, while it advanced the interests of European nations. The set of knowledges and ideas about Africans devised by Europeans in the context of imperialism has been termed “Africanist discourses”.

Mama points at how “the African” is often described in European discourses, and how these images originated from colonial times and slavery. In feminist peacebuilding theory, these stereotypes are questioned, and the diversity of women’s roles in conflicts are celebrated. Instead of narratives which victimise women, this victimhood discourse is reframed to perceive women as agents of change (Shepherd, 2016).

Women’s agency is visible in spontaneous and sporadic interventions to protect their families from immediate violence, in campaigns against human rights abuse and for justice; in building trust and reconciliation across the conflict divide. (Manchanda, 2005: 4741)

Rita Manchanda (2005) gives some examples of roles women play during conflict, and how peacebuilding can look more “daily” than is often perceived. Research on women’s agency leads to an understanding on how an increased participation of women in peacebuilding, peace processes – or more in generally “post-conflict governance” – leads to new conceptions of peace and conflict. On a broader scale, challenging dominant narratives about women’s role in conflicts is of importance since “women’s national, regional, and international involvement fundamentally shapes how peacebuilding projects and processes develop” (de la Rey & McKay, 2006: 150). Conversely, Cockburn (2007) sees war as the force which sustains existing stereotypes about masculinity (*militarized masculinities*). “War deepens already sexual divisions, magnifies the contrast between femininity and masculinity, and legitimates male violence. It enhances men’s authority in a quantum leap” (Cockburn, 2007: 228). Chandra Mohanty (2003) and Sylvia Tamale (2020) state that from a postcolonial perspective, a reinforcement of these gendered stereotypes are usually more to the benefit of international actors, rather than of local communities. They often erase diversity in women’s political agency as peacebuilders, and do not integrate structural transformation. Similarly, Cockburn (2007)

also calls for centring women's lived experiences and prioritize subaltern and grassroots organisations which have more socially transformative possibilities for new conceptions of war and peace. Shepherd (2017) states that feminist peacebuilding scholars take the institutional way as well as the informal (grassroots) way of peacebuilding together into account to become a more holistic image of peacebuilding.

Last, a main reason of why global stereotypes about women's roles in conflict are being kept alive and reinforced is more generally because dominant perspectives (mostly male or Western) decide on legitimate knowledge about peace and war. This "epistemic violence" or violence over the legitimacy of knowledge of some over others marginalizes or even silences women's voices, especially those from the Global South and Indigenous communities, makes it more difficult to transform or reshape the discourse and policy around peacebuilding, conflict and peace (Björkdahl & Mannergren, 2025). Reinforcing these stereotypes allows institutions to ignore the existing structural inequalities and power relations that sustain conflict. Feminist peacebuilders insist that systemic and intersecting issues, such as patriarchal structures, class, race and colonialism, should be addressed to achieve "positive peace" (Galtung, 1976), which is more sustainable than "negative peace", or the situation where there is just an absence of violence.

Recognising the power of discourse is essential in this thesis, since it goes hand in hand with the choice of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) (Lazar, 2005) which will be further explained in chapter 2.

1.2.4. Towards transformative peacebuilding

Grounded in the conviction that peace should be transformative and sustainable rather than restorative, feminist peacebuilding theory believes that the very structures that perpetuate inequality and violence should be dismantled instead of the superficial, symbolical inclusion of women (Bell & O'Rourke, 2007; Otto, 2006). A feminist peacebuilding approach means stressing the redistribution of power, and centring peace processes which include women's lived experiences and views of security. These views are often grounded in community-based grassroots practices which are in many cases not acknowledged as peacebuilding practices. Enloe (2004, 2014) offers insights in radically different ways of peace and conflict narratives: the "politics of the everyday" – where women live, work and resist – seem to be just as important as violent conflicts. Only if these politics are addressed, structural issues in society can be uncovered.

But how can peacebuilding transform a society? De la Rey and McKay (2006) plead for making women co-architects of peace processes and post-conflict reconstruction, since this could improve women's status and agency on all levels globally. Cockburn (2007) calls for a shift from empathy and relief to an actual clash with transformative value. Shepherd (2017) claims that the active participation of women in peacebuilding changes the meaning of peacebuilding itself. The umbrella of conceptualisations of peacebuilding will expand, root causes and power dynamics will be exposed, and on a broader level conceptualisations of peace and security theory will change into better, more inclusive theories. It puts social transformation as a main goal, which aligns with Galtung's concept of "positive peace" – in which peace is more than just the absence of violence, which he calls "negative peace" (Galtung, 1976). Rather than just ending the violence, feminist peacebuilders criticise the structural reasons that lead to conflict in the first place. Transforming and reimagining peace can thus take on different forms (O'Reilly et al., 2015). One way to do so is by challenging dominant policy frameworks, such as the UN's widely recognised Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda.

1.3. Feminist critique on the WPS agenda

In many cases, women have been pushed to the sidelines in peacebuilding, or even more broadly in global politics, which represents the gendered nature of in-and exclusion of peacebuilding (Aggestam & Towns, 2019; Paffenholz, 2021; Väyrynen, 2021). In 2000, The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, based on the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325 or S/RES/1325) (UNSC, 2000) was introduced to act as a framework for change in peacebuilding practices (Aggestam & Eitrem Holmgren, 2022). This is widely regarded as a landmark resolution in the process of institutionalising gender in peace and security processes (Bache, 2019; Browne & Weiss, 2020; George & Shepherd, 2016).

This resolution urges member states to ensure an increased representation of all women at all decision-making levels for the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts. It urges countries to strive for the increased inclusion of women in peacekeeping, peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction. Furthermore, the resolution calls for the protection of women and girls from gender-based violence during and after conflict. It provides a number of important operational mandates, with implications for Member States and the entities of the United

Nations system when there is no compliance (UN Women, 2015). The groundwork of resolution 1325 was laid out by individual women, as well as civil society organisations. Women's organisations mobilized "women-friendly-states" to support the WPS agenda normatively, politically and financially. The NGO Working Group on WPS exists of sixteen international women's and human rights organisations, and pushed the UN Security Council to adopt more resolutions regarding women's participation and representation (Shepherd, 2017; Tryggstad, 2018).

In the following decades, nine resolutions have added subsequent pressure and measures to strengthen the WPS agenda (Bache, 2019). According to Salama Hub (2023), adding a gender lens into conflict prevention, resolution or peacebuilding in general could lead to better violence prevention against women, protecting their rights and inclusion in all levels of decision-making processes. The WPS agenda is the foundation for gender equality, empowerment and participation of women in peace and security processes on a global scale.

Nevertheless, the WPS agenda has had to endure much criticism from feminist scholars regarding its limitations. According to Shepherd (2016, 2017), the WPS agenda is often described as a "normative" agenda. The WPS agenda is rarely, if ever, discussed by non-feminist scholars, and references to WPS are rare within peacebuilding documents. Cohn (2008) reflects if bringing women to the table actually changes the nature of that table.

1.3.1. Inclusion without transformation

The WPS critique starts by critiquing the premise of a liberal, state-centred security framework which includes women without reevaluating the dominant structures themselves. The existing documents that are the foundation of the gender equality agenda, such as the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 and the broader WPS agenda, entail gender-biased assumptions that are in many ways reinforcing the things that they claim to be against (Shepherd, 2017; Wilson, 2005).

In her book (2017), Shepherd shows how the UN understands peacebuilding by exposing the gendered and spatial logics of this understanding through a discourse analysis of peacebuilding, women, gender, and civil society. She argues that the UN fails to take gender seriously as a power dynamic; that the UN has difficulties valuing women's participation in peacebuilding; and that the UN creates spatial hierarchies which undermine more "bottom-up" initiatives of peacebuilding. Shepherd critiques the absence of a gender construct in the UN's

peacebuilding discourse. This, in her words, “permits an emphasis on “gender equality” and a somewhat technical commitment to “gender mainstreaming”, which in turn perpetuates an integrationist rather than a transformative logic of gender” (Shepherd, 2017: 101). Cohn (2008) points at the fact that the WPS agenda tries to include women’s participation in peacemaking and peacebuilding, but is not attentive enough for the root causes or dominant conceptions of war, peace and conflict. The main goal is to “put an end to war”, rather than tackling the root causes which have led to this war (Cohn et al., 2004). This is what Cockburn (2007) points at as well. First, the resolution made no mention of ending war itself, which is not in line with the whole purpose of the United Nations as an institution. Second, the resolution did not include any paragraph about the gender hierarchies in conflict which cause women’s victimization and exclusion from peace processes. The two main themes of the resolution are the protection of women and women’s representation. Protection is shown to be more in the way of trying to make “war safer for women”, because of the recurring focus on women’s passivity and victimhood, rather than their role as agents. More agency for women did become a topic on the agenda, but not in the way women feminist peacebuilding scholars want. The absence of “gender” in the UN’s discourse shows why the UNSCR 1325 has its flaws and has not fully understood the assignment to transform peacebuilding on a broader, gender-aware and global level.

1.3.2. Essentialism and narrow roles

Although it is generally conceived as a landmark resolution because of the changed narrative from women as victims to women as agents, Cohn (2008) formulates critique on the limited impact, the performative character, questionable discourse, and rhetorical strategies of UNSCR 1325. This reinforces essentialist gender stereotypes – women as peaceful, men as aggressive – and neglects underlying problems and the barriers of transformation. Women are between the lines still framed as victims rather than as peace-supporting actors, which diminishes their agency and is not attentive to the underlying structural inequalities (Shepherd, 2017). This essentialisation of calling women ‘inherently peaceful’ is what some authors call *window-dressing* (Aggestam & Bergman Rosamond, 2021; Sjoberg, 2006). Intersectionality and agency are according to Cohn (2008) important perspectives to counter these essentialist and homogenizing discourses. To avoid the mere symbolic inclusion of women, feminist theorists should address root causes and limitations of institutional reforms to influence institutions and make them aware of the importance of language use in political discourse.

Regarding the power of discourse, Cohn et al. (2004) point out how the WPS agenda reinforces stereotypes. “Women suffer the impact of war disproportionately”, is a defining construction of the image of “women” in the Security Council while writing the UNSCR 1325. The language that was drafted for the resolution was in the first place focused to get rid of the “womenandchildren”-as-helpless-victims construct⁴, and to empower women as agents engaged in peacebuilding. “I fear that “women-as-peacemakers” places too much of war on gender. And in so doing, leaves the dominant political and epistemological frameworks untouched.” (Cohn, 2008). Cohn et al. (2004) do praise the UNSCR 1325 for bringing women as actors (instead of mere passive victims) into the discourse of the UNSC. Cohn (2008) and Cockburn (2007) warn for the danger of co-optation, in which gender-related concepts turn into hollow buzzwords to mainstream feminist peacebuilding agendas.

Similarly, Shepherd (2017) points out that gender as an analytical concept is often seen as a challenge to provide more “gender equality”. Gender equality in its turn is often seen as the result of disempowerment of women in society. This combination of women-gender leads to a difficult situation: it enforces the male-female binary and closes the possibility of participation for gender-queer individuals.

Although the gender discourse has filtered through to policy-making institutions, in the process actors have re-interpreted the concept of gender to suit their institutional needs. In some instances, “gender” has been used to side-step a focus on “women” and on the radical policy implications of overcoming their disprivilege. (Razavi & Miller, 1995: 41)

Confusing ‘women’ with ‘gender’ leads to a lack of attention being paid to actual women since gender stands in for women, according to Razavi & Miller (1995). The *gender* perspective becomes a synonym for the *women’s* perspective. When a discourse says *gender*, but means *women*, it diminishes women's agency and subjugates them to men in a gendered power hierarchy. Ultimately, this leads to the exclusion of women from formal and informal political spaces, creating what are known as 'conditions of impossibility'.

⁴ The “womenandchildren” phrase stems originally from Cynthia Enloe’s (2000) “Womenandchildren: making feminist sense of the Persian Gulf Crisis”

1.3.3. Critical change remains limited

Although UNSCR 1325 called for “an increase in the participation of women at decision-making levels in conflict resolution”, we see that 25 years later not much has changed yet (2000: 2). In the report conducted by UN Women which was published in 2023, only one out of 18 peace agreements reached in 2022 included women in the peace process. This was in the case of South Sudan (Muñoz Bernad, 2024). Carol Cohn (2008) stresses the importance of how feminist knowledge can and should influence international policies, such as UNSCR 1325 to get a more gender-just perspective. Similarly, in order to make sense of global peacebuilding architectures, such as the WPS agenda, Shweta Singh (2017) urges to understand local contexts through feminist, decolonial ideas of *the everyday*, *lived experience* and *the local*.

A revision of the WPS agenda is wished for, specifically one that includes different voices of women from all over the world, and one that empowers women instead of only symbolically. Ultimately, understanding the different objectives of and the way how institutions, such as the EU, include the WPS agenda in their policy is of importance.

1.4. Normative Power Europe

Since the EU is a key player in this thesis, this section will briefly discuss the EU's approach. How does the EU see and portray itself, and how does it export norms like gender equality? This goes back to the very nature and goals of the EU as an institution. By analysing the EU's support to women as peacebuilders during the Tigray war (2020-2022), the EU is viewed of as an actor that passes on principles of gender equality, inclusive peace and peacebuilding next to material support. Drawing on Ian Manners' (2002) concept of *Normative Power Europe* (NPE), I investigate through which mechanisms the EU diffuses its norms and analyse in what ways these efforts lead to substantive changes in local peacebuilding practices. Both the ideational side and the limitations of NPE in a complex post-conflict environment are considered.

Manners (2002) argues that we should go beyond the debate of the EU either being a civilian or military power and stresses the ideational “normative” power of EU on an international scale. He follows several conceptions regarding power over opinion (Carr, 1962), *idée force* (Duchêne, 1973) and ideological power (Galtung, 1973: 33), who states that “ideological power is powerful because the power-sender's ideas penetrate and shape the will of the power-

recipient through the media of culture”. Manners (2002: 239) introduces the concept of *Normative Power Europe*, which stresses the EU’s “ability to shape conceptions of “normal” in international relations”. The EU’s international identity and policy approaches are based on norms such as peace, human rights, anti-discrimination, gender equality and social solidarity. Through funding, partnerships, diplomatic endeavours, humanitarian aid and regional integration, the EU diffuses its norms on an international scale (Alston & Weiler, 1999; Manners, 2002).

However, feminist and postcolonial researchers urge to critically examine the intentions of EU’s normative actions. Are they genuine, and do they seek to empower (local) women, or do they risk reinforcing state-centric, Western, neo-colonial or paternalistic models of peacebuilding, rooted in existing stereotypes? Shepherd (2017) points at the same limitations of the WPS agenda: the EU as a norm diffuser is tokenistic, essentialist and lacks intersectional awareness. While there is gender equality on paper, practical or institutional changes lag. Local realities and EU’s international, institutional approach usually do not match. Shepherd (2017) underlines the necessity of a root-cause, context-sensitive and intersectional approach, and calls for an active integration of women into projects, rather than just “adding” them for symbolical reasons.

1.5. Conclusion and application in thesis

This feminist-layered theoretical framework allows for a multi-dimensional analysis, starting from the current dominance of the liberal peacebuilding model to the usage of feminist peacebuilding as a critical alternative, to engagement with global normative policy developments in the form of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, to the EU’s self-portrayal and agency through the concept of Normative Power Europe (NPE). While I do not assume that the EU’s norm diffusion is too Western, neo-colonial or paternalistic, I use the concept of NPE as a guideline to critically investigate how the EU positions itself as a normative actor in the context of the Tigray war. NPE is used as a framing tool to understand how the EU promotes itself as a normative actor through a discourse based on human rights, gender equality and peacebuilding; to examine whether its actual actions are in line with its ambitious discourse in Ethiopia, taking into consideration the feminist peacebuilding lens. This section about NPE serves as a bridge to connect feminist peacebuilding theory with the case study of evaluating

whether the EU as a normative power aligns with feminist peacebuilding topics such as agency, intersectionality and context-sensitivity, or if it remains rooted in liberal and institutional ideas of peacebuilding.

These theoretical foundations are essential to analyse EU support for women as peacebuilders in Ethiopia. In the first place, the work of these authors adds to what a transformative approach can look like; not just words, but power, agency and real deeds. Additionally, these theoretical foundations try to grasp the root causes of structural inequality and global institutional and policy approaches through challenging existing stereotypes. It goes beyond superficial, essentialist conceptions and symbolical inclusion, and calls for giving women the agency and recognition they deserve. This framework serves as a guideline throughout this thesis to examine global WPS agendas and examine EU's normative power through a feminist lens: is it enabling substantive change, or does the EU reinforce stereotypes and shallow inclusion? This feminist-layered theoretical framework thus serves as a lens to understand and analyse EU policy documents in the analysis, which will follow in part III of this thesis.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research design

In the context of the Tigray war (2020-2022) in Ethiopia, this chapter describes the empirical approach used to investigate how the European Union (EU) portrays and encourages women as peacebuilders. Building further on the feminist-layered theoretical framework outlined in chapter 1, this chapter is based on feminist peacebuilding, feminist critique on the WPS agenda and Ian Manners' (2002) concept of Normative Power Europe (NPE) to guide a qualitative, feminist-informed discourse analysis. The feminist-layered framework of this thesis led me to choose a Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) (Lazar, 2005) over Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Through a case study of the Tigray war, a FCDA will be applied to obtain an in depth look at the EU's stances, discourse and intertextual meanings in EU policy documents.

2.2. Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA)

Based on the work of Michelle Lazar (2005): "Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis: Gender, power and ideology in discourse", the methodological technique used in this thesis is Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA). Following Foucault's (1972) definition of discourse, Lazar defines discourse as:

a set of related statements – manifested multimodally through an interplay, for example, of language and visual structures (Lazar, 2000) – that produce and organize a particular order of reality, and specific subject positions therein. Discourse makes possible ways of knowing about the world, a sense of who we may (and may not be) within that world order, and how we may (and may not) relate to one another. (Lazar, 2005: 143)

FCDA combines Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with feminist theory to uncover how a gendered social order is sustained through complex power structures and ideology. Discourse in FCDA is seen as both a tool as oppression – by reinforcing existing patriarchal structures – and a potential instrument of liberation through feminist theoretical resistance and

transformation (Lazar, 2005). It offers a powerful approach for analysing how gendered power relations are established and sustained through institutional language, policy framing, and normative claims. Lazar points to the intersectional nature of “gender” as a concept which is discursively constructed, and links it to social identity such as social position, ethnicity, sexuality and geography. It investigates how language subtly reinforces gendered hierarchies, and places discourse in its broader socio-political and institutional context to examine, in this case, EU foreign policy, gender norms and post-conflict peacebuilding measures. Furthermore, asymmetrical power relations in discourse often have a gendered nature which should be uncovered. In her work, she wants to “show the complex and subtle ways in which taken-for-granted social assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, perpetuated, negotiated and challenged” (Lazar, 2005: 1-2). FCDA is explicitly critical since it aims to tackle systems of inequality, and work in a transformative way.

Lazar’s work is in the first place based on CDA (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Van Dijk, 1994b). Although CDA leaves room for feminist scholars to work under this rubric (Van Dijk, 1991), Lazar (2005) points to the necessity of an explicitly feminist viewpoint. First, there is a need for explicit feminist concerns in discourse analysis theory. Second, the founders of CDA are straight white men (Cameron, 1998: 969-70). Lazar (2005) does not see the social identity of these authors as a problem, since they do leave room for feminist theory. However, it should go beyond mere feminist citations, and to a ‘feminist politics of articulation’ (Wetherell, 1995) to clearly use gender as a “omni-relevant category” in order to understand how gender operates in a complex way. Third, in 2005, Lazar pointed to the current non-existence of FCDA scholars, a situation she tries to improve with her volume (Lazar, 2005).

The decision of choosing CDA in favour of other forms of discourse analysis is based on the overlapping social emancipatory goals of feminism and CDA. It works on the nexus of social practices and discourse structures (Wodak & Meyer, 2001) and contextualizes language through a wide range of tools and strategies (Lazar, 2005). In Lazar’s words: “the marriage of feminism with CDA, in sum, can produce a rich and powerful political critique for action” (Lazar 2005: 5). Feminist CDA analyses gender, power and ideology in discourse from a political and a social perspective to understand how discourse is constructed. Feminist CDA sees discourse as one element of social practice, which is something that Chouliaraki & Fairclough (1999) have pointed out as well.

Lazar (2005) lays out the main goals of FCDA. First, “critiquing discourses which sustain a patriarchal social order: that is, relations of power that systematically privilege men as a social group and disadvantage, exclude and disempower women as a social group”. Social practices are gendered, and it is this gendered nature that FCDA tries to uncover by analysing discourse.

Second, gender should be viewed of as an interpretative category for people of a certain community to make sense of and structure their social practices. Gender is a social relation that constitutes all other social relations and activities. Being ‘male’ or ‘female’ decides in many societies which social roles one must undertake. By recognising the gendered nature of social practices through a feminist political critique, it is possible to deconstruct and become social transformation. Furthermore, a feminist perspective in FCDA means that there is a critical distance on gender and on oneself. Gender should be acknowledged as an ideological structure. Ideologies represent a certain discourse and help to maintain unequal power relations and exert dominance. Lazar (2005) states that gender ideology is hegemonic, although it often does not appear as dominant at all. The catch is that the “two-gender concept” is so generally accepted, that the effects of this ideological construction are not always realised anymore.

Third, FCDA aims to highlight the complexity of gender and power relations. A recognition of difference and diversity among ‘women’ and ‘men’ is an essential step in including multiple perspectives. Furthermore, the pervasiveness of underlying discursive workings of modern power in many modern societies should be recognized.

Fourth, feminist CDA focuses on how gender ideology and gender relations of power are (re)produced and contested in social practices, relationships and in social identities, both in texts and talk. Because of this broad connection of subjects, feminist CDA is open to interdisciplinary research.

Last, within the field of FCDA, critical reflexivity is a necessary element for researchers. A healthy dose of awareness about the power of institutions, people’s background, skin colour, birthplace and more, further shape how FCDA researchers perceive certain topics. Through this self-reflexivity and acknowledging position in society, FCDA researchers are critical about representation, hidden power dynamics, politics of exclusion, their own position, and doing research in other parts of the world (Lazar, 2005; Van Dijk, 1994a).

2.3. Data collection

2.3.1. *Primary sources: EU-policy documents*

A variety of EU policy papers serve as the foundation of this master's thesis. Keeping in mind that the EU is not just a single actor, but that it consists of many institutions which together form the EU apparatus, many kinds of sources fit this analysis. However, I chose to limit myself to textual documents found online on the different EU websites. All the sources are from 2018 on, except for the *National Indicative Programme for Ethiopia (2014-2020)* (2014) since this time frame allows for an assessment of the EU's gender frameworks that are relevant for this research, as well as an examination of Tigray and Ethiopia specific sources during and after the Tigray War.

Documents used are resolutions from the European Parliament (EP), conclusions from the European Commission (EC) and the Council of the European Union, statements and reports from the European External Action Service (EEAS), EU strategic frameworks or Action plans like the National Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI- Global Europe) of Ethiopia and the Gender Action Plan (GAP) III and funding announcements or project outlines for women's peace initiatives. The texts were selected due to their institutional diversity, which permits a cross-cutting discursive analysis, and their significance to the EU's position on the Tigray war (2020–2022). Furthermore, a variety of sources within EU institutions leads to a variety of stances. An extensive list of the main primary sources can be found in the bibliography of this thesis.

2.3.2. *Secondary sources: reports and literature*

Apart from an extensive analysis of EU sources, this thesis draws on existing scholarship and research reports related to feminist peacebuilding, the WPS agenda, Normative Power Europe, women's agency in conflict and the Tigray War. These works are not merely background literature but also guide my analytical lens. Furthermore, reports of the UN, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, UN women and Ethiopian NGO's or umbrella organisations such as the Network of Ethiopian Women's Associations (NEWA) and the Women's Association of Tigray (WAT) are included in this thesis, which have helped me understand on the ground realities that EU discourse might gloss over.

The selection of the secondary sources is based on several considerations. First, nearly all sources are in English, since this is the language I as a researcher understand, and most of the sources on this topic are available in English. Second, the timeframe: I tried to include mostly articles from 2014 onwards. However, in the theoretical framework there are older contributions from key authors who wrote about feminist peacebuilding, feminist critique on the WPS agenda or Normative Power Europe, since many of them laid out the foundation of certain theories. Third, thematically I selected secondary sources by searching for keywords such as ‘women’, ‘peacebuilding’, ‘EU in Ethiopia’, ‘gender’, ‘WPS’, ‘women’s empowerment’, ‘conflict resolution’.

This range of secondary sources is used to give an extensive overview of themes related to this research, illustrate the academic and policy level debates, guide the analytical lens, and ultimately to check the EU’s discursive claims. They offer alternative framings of peacebuilding, which counter the liberal peacebuilding paradigm and the masculine nature of peacebuilding practice and discourse.

2.4. Data analysis

FCDA is well suited for examining institutional and policy discourses, such as discourse produced by the EU and its foreign and security institutions. It does not see discourse as neutral or descriptive, and views language as a site of ideological struggle, where representations of gender and peace are constructed in ways that can either challenge or reinforce existing hierarchies. In this sense, FCDA functions perfectly in the framework of critical feminist peace and conflict studies, and in particular feminist peacebuilding. FCDA allows for a critical reading of the EU’s policy language, analyses how women in peacebuilding in Tigray are constructed, and examines which power hierarchies or normative assumptions might be involved in this discourse. It will analyse the language, representations, agency, exclusions, discursive contradictions and silences within the documents which highlight the tension between liberal peacebuilding and transformative feminist peacebuilding approaches. The aims of this research are to understand the EU’s discourse in promoting the participation of women as peacebuilders during and after the Tigray War (2020-2022). Based on the theoretical premises of feminist peacebuilding, I will use FCDA to understand the EU’s discourse to enable a triple focus:

- 1) To assess representations of women through an analysis of framings of empowerment, intersectionality, and gender concepts such as gender-mainstreaming;
- 2) To question the EU's close alignment with global frameworks such as the WPS agenda;
- 3) To examine whether the EU's discourse as a promotor of gender norms on a global scale has transformative value, in which women are not merely textually added to the discourse, but empowered through the EU's language use and promises.

I chose to do the coding of the relevant EU sources manually, which is encouraged in feminist theory to understand discourse on a deeper level, and to point out all the rhetorical and discursive strategies. In practice, I searched for representations of women, and specifically for concepts such as peace, gender, peacebuilding, empowerment, leadership, partnership, intersectionality, gender mainstreaming, gender transformative and the WPS agenda. First, I searched for EU documents, press releases, statements, Action Plans and funding strategies online. Then, I grouped these documents under the different EU institutions. A first orientational reading of the sources, considered together with the research questions, sub-questions and feminist peacebuilding principles led to an overview of four main discursive themes: (1) EU as a global norm setter, (2) structural inequalities and intersectional framings, (3) local agency and grassroots women's roles, and (4) empowerment and the WPS agenda. Next, I did a more in-depth reading and colour-coded the important parts in the sources, which gave me a clear visual representation of the different discursive themes. After that, I constructed a coding sheet in which the information of the document, important discursive parts, and analytical notes were linked to the four categories.

2.5. Positionality and reflexivity

To do research, is to question your own position as a researcher. By using FCDA as a methodology, I must be aware of my own position within broader knowledge-power structures, how this highlights epistemic injustice, particularly in the case of analysing institutional discourses from the "Global North" about conflict in the "Global South"⁵. Rather than just interpreting discourse, I critically engage with the meanings behind the EU's discourse, to

⁵ I put this between quotation marks, since "Global North" and "Global South" are also contested concepts that represent power.

underline the importance of visibility, agency and participation of Ethiopian women as peacebuilders during and after the Tigray war.

Although I have studied in Ethiopia as well, I approach this topic mainly from a European academic context. By analysing EU discourse, I automatically risk reproducing Eurocentric perspectives. Since the focus of this master's thesis lies at the intersection of European policy and Ethiopian women as peacebuilders, acknowledging this pitfall is crucial. I mostly rely on, often institutional, policy documents, secondary sources, and feminist scholarship which stresses the distance between myself and the lived experiences of women in Tigray and Ethiopia more broadly. FCDA allows me to be aware of the power relations between researcher and researched, to question dominant narratives in EU discourse, and to highlight discrepancies. In conclusion, my interpretative lens is shaped by my social environment, education as well as my geographical location, and complemented by the feminist-layered framework and feminist methodologies of discourse analysis. Inspired by feminist thinkers in this research, this thesis is based on the belief that knowledge generation is partial, situational, and intricately linked to the researcher's own perspective, rather than a claim of impartiality.

PART II: WOMEN, CONFLICT AND PEACEBUILDING: FROM THE GLOBAL TO TIGRAY

3. Women, conflict and peacebuilding: The case of the Tigray War (2020-2022)

Listening to women— paying close attention to women’s knowledge claims, of all kinds—is essential to efforts at ending war. Listening to women ensures a peace that is inclusive and expansive, a peace that is attuned to the operation of power. A gender-blind, exclusionary, narrow vision of peace and security is a thin and meager vision indeed. (Shepherd, 2021; cited in Anderson et al., 2025: 3)

3.1. Introduction

Between 1992 and 2018, women constituted only 13% of negotiators, 6% of mediators and 6% of signatories in major peace processes (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). On a global scale, women’s participation in peacebuilding practices has gained much attention. A global study conducted by UN Women found that the probability of a peace agreement lasting at least two years increased by 20 percent with women’s participation, and by 35 percent with women’s participation for 15 years (UN Women, 2015). On a policy level, the adoption of UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) in 2000 has introduced and diffused norms regarding the participation of women in peace and security related issues. However, their actual participation remains limited, inconsistent and symbolic. Although the number of references to women and gender in peace agreements visibly increased, they often still draw on essentialist perceptions of women. Nina Wilén (2022: 128) argues that “while we may have passed the stage of “gender blindness”, we are still in the phase of gender dilemmas.”

This chapter examines both the global and the regional dynamics in Tigray that shape women’s involvement in peacebuilding. After a short overview of the Tigray War and the roles and realities women played, the barriers to the inclusion of women in peacebuilding are highlighted.

3.2. Women's participation and the quest for sustainable peace

If the goal of a peace process is only to end violence, then women – who are rarely the belligerents – are unlikely to be considered legitimate participants. If the goal is to build peace, however, it makes sense to gain more diverse inputs from the rest of society. (O'Reilly et al., 2015: 1)

O'Reilly et al. stress in this quote that the participation of women in peace processes is linked to dominant and masculine security paradigms which decide on the nature of peace and peacebuilding. The message is clear: if the goal is to build peace, more women should be included.

Women's meaningful participation in peacebuilding has proven to be of uttermost importance for several reasons. The Broadening Participation Project (2011-2015) of the Graduate Institute of Geneva found by examining 40 peace processes since the end of the Cold War that a peace agreement was nearly always reached and more likely to be carried out when women's organizations were able to successfully influence the process. When women had a strong influence on the process, an agreement was nearly always reached (Paffenholz, 2015b, 2015a, 2015c). Women's participation in peace agreements leads to more consensus and coalition-building (UN women, 2015), pushes for actual implementations, practical problem-solving and monitoring, which leads to longer lasting, more sustainable peace (Krause et al., 2018; O'Reilly et al., 2015; Paffenholz et al., 2015; UN Women, 2015). "Women excel in mass action" and are strong at pushing for peace, which often leads to women being invited into official processes (Paffenholz et al., 2015: 43). Additionally, women bring different knowledge and topics to the table, in which understanding and tackling the root causes of conflicts and structural inequalities are just as important as military and power related issues. Social, economic, justice and gender-right reforms lie at the basis of avoiding conflict, and societies with higher levels of gender equality in all spheres are less likely to experience renewed conflicts (Mac Ginty, 2025; O'Reilly, 2024; O'Reilly et al., 2015).

Nevertheless, when women are included, the nature of participation is important. Inclusion must be meaningful and not tokenistic: a symbolic inclusion is not sufficient, since it is not really empowering women as peacebuilders, which links back the theoretical foundations in chapter 1. Other factors such as early inclusion in the peace process, monitoring, supportive capacity building, funding and resources all have an impact if women's participation becomes

influential or if it stays symbolic (O'Reilly et al., 2015; Paffenholz et al., 2015; Shepherd, 2017). The structural barriers for women which will be discussed later are difficult to overcome, but not impossible. Aggestam & Eitrem Holmgren's (2022) "quest for sustainable peace" is inextricably linked to gender and resilience. Ultimately, women should be included in a meaningful and gender-sensitive way which recognises these barriers, acknowledges different perceptions of peace and conflict, and values the voices of women. Only then long-lasting peace can be reached.

3.3. Overview of the Tigray war (2020-2022)

Ethiopia's two-year civil war in Tigray is often called a "forgotten war" (Naranjo, 2023). Between 300.000 and 800.000 people were killed and millions were displaced (Annys et al., 2021; UGent, 2022), but nevertheless the war did not get the international and media attention a large scale conflict as this deserves. Many estimates of deaths are even close to a million, which leads to some calling the Tigray war the deadliest armed conflict of the 21st century (Freedman, 2024; Naranjo, 2023). The Tigray War started on November 3, 2020, and ended in November 2022 after negotiations in Pretoria, South Africa (International Crisis Group, 2022). The main actors of the war were the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE), supported by Eritrea. Beyond the Tigray region, the violence extended to neighbouring Amhara and Afar, seriously undermining Ethiopia's social cohesion and impacting the security situation in numerous other areas of the nation (Weldemichel, 2025).

The war was marked by appalling abuses of human rights, including war crimes and crimes against humanity, and the trauma caused by the fighting is likely to last for some time (Guardian, 2022). The severe consequences resulting from the war have led to a massive humanitarian crisis, including rising uncertainty on an economic, political and security level (Abate Demissie, 2023). The ethnicization of the conflict, the Ethiopian prime minister Abiy Ahmed's ambition to consolidate power at the expense of his early reformist agenda, and the internationalization of the fight with the nearly instantaneous involvement of Eritrean troops alongside the federal government were the three issues that directly determined the war (Caruso & Akamo, 2024). The complexity of human rights abuses and the humanitarian consequences were widespread. Forced displacement (4,5 million IDPs), ethnic cleansing, deprivation of

livelihoods and restricted access to humanitarian aid, mass detentions and abuses a collapse of the healthcare system and services and widespread atrocities and human rights abuses are the main consequences human rights watch and Amnesty International point at (Human Rights Watch & Amnesty International, 2022; Pichon, 2022). Furthermore, the Tigray War is a prime example of the weaponisation of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) during war times, because of the high occurrence of it: some estimates point state that 40 to 50% of all women and girls experienced SGBV (Fisseha et al., 2023).

3.4. Women in the Tigray war: Roles and realities

It is important to recognise the excessive occurrence of SGBV against women in the Tigray War. Nevertheless, portraying women merely as victims as if it is their *only* role during and after conflict is taking away their agency. The reality of the roles women played, or have been pushed into, during the Tigray War overlaps partly with the global patterns and existing stereotypes of women's roles during conflict. The reality of the Tigray War shows that women played a diversity of roles, which surpass the *victimhood*, *peaceful women*, and other essentialist narratives about women in conflict.

3.4.1. *Victims/survivors of SGBV*

While some estimates say that 120.000 women and girls experienced SGBV, others point at 40 to 50% (Baldwin, 2022, 2024; Fisseha et al., 2023). Globally, women of all ages, places, and marital statuses are affected by the pervasive issue of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). It mostly targets women because of their gender and encompasses economic, psychological, sexual, and physical abuse (Hailu et al., 2024). Sexual and Gender-based violence (SGBV) is a phenomenon that happens on a global scale, and does not know any geographical, cultural, social, economic ethic or other boundaries. In the context of war, SGBV is often committed on a great scale as a method of warfare. In general, women and girls are disproportionally affected by SGBV during conflicts, mostly through gang rape, intimidation, abuse or even death (Hailu et al., 2024)

SGBV and physical violence During the Tigray War was committed by the Eritrean Defence Force (EDF) who were supporting the Ethiopian government, the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF), Amhara Regional Police Special Forces (ASF) and Fano, an informal Amhara militia group (Baldwin, 2022, 2024). Women were the victims and have experienced besides physical also psychological trauma. Furthermore, many women were unable to receive medical or psychological assistance after their assaults. This is because more than 70% of the health facilities in Tigray were inoperable after the first six months of the war (Fisseha et al., 2023). Victimisation of women during Tigray war is double layered. First, SGBV attacks women's own integrity. Second, women who have experienced SGBV are often stigmatized by their societies, or even by their own families. War trauma, trauma caused by sexual violence, and long-lasting consequences, such as giving birth and bringing up a child as a single parent because of rape, often with little support from their families due to stigmatisation (Salama Hub, 2023).

“Across Ethiopia, women are presented as protectors of history, of culture and of nationalism, and this has ultimately manifested in placing meaning on and within the female body”, states Francesca Baldwin (2022: 31). In Ethiopia, about 20.2% of women have experienced some form of SGBV, although this may not reflect the true scale of this issue. Victims do not always recognise, or have the space to recognise different forms of violence (such as economic deprivation, emotional manipulation). Women in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps and in conflict regions, such as Tigray during the war, are particularly at risk for all types of SGBV and are more in need of protection (Hailu et al.). although there are many dimensions to SGBV, a basic understanding of its implications for this research is useful.

One probable explanation for the targeting of women and girls is the unique role that women have had in Tigray's history, especially regarding their contributions to the civil conflict. The escalation of gender-based violence in this conflict is directed on women and girls. Since women have played a significant role in Tigray's history, their violation and destruction convey a strong message about Tigray's history being violated and destroyed. Baldwin (2022: 32) wonders whether this war has targeted women specifically since they represent the history, ideals, and promises that are fundamental to Tigray.

3.4.2. *Fighters and commanders in TDF*

While women are usually framed in news articles and academic scholarship as victims of SGBV during the war, the numbers of participation in the Tigrayan Defence Forces (TDF) tell a different story. Some sources state that around 20% of the combatants in the Tigray War were women (EC, 2023). Other estimates go as far as to say that women made up 30% of the TDF (Berehe & Matfess, 2025). In a recent research project called “the untold stories of Tigray’s female veterans”, Mehret Okubay Berehe and Hilary Matfess (2025) aim to fill this knowledge gap by centring the voices of female veterans who fought in the Tigray War. While some joined the army out protection against SGBV, others joined for insecurity reasons such as forced displacement, a feeling of powerlessness, to avenge themselves, or just because they wanted to. Women took on a diversity in roles, ranging from medical positions to public outreach, radio operators and foot soldiers who fought at the front. Nevertheless, although it is said that some rose to leadership ranks, others have said that there was a glass ceiling for women’s positions in the TDF. Women were faced with a double responsibility: they were fighters, but they were also responsible for doing “women’s work” such as cooking and cleaning in the army. Additionally, some soldiers also experienced SGBV within the army. The current situation for female veterans is definitely not optimal due to structural challenges in Tigray, as well as gender-specific vulnerabilities (Berehe & Matfess, 2025). A Tigray discussant of the 2024 report *Determining Ethiopian Women’s Status* (Hailu et al., 2024: 126) said that: “My granddaughter joined the army in the early days of the conflict. My daughter and my grandson followed, saying they needed peace at all costs. Some of them returned and some didn’t.”

Baldwin (2022) researches the role of women as combatants in the 1974-91 civil war in Ethiopia and compares it to the Tigray war (2020-2022). In the 1974-91 civil war in Ethiopia, about one third of the active combatants of the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) were women. Their roles ranged from soldier to political teachers, to health workers, to technicians, to strategists, generals and community project managers. Through actively participating in fighting, women hoped that they would transform existing gender norms and the notion of femininity. Participating women were excused to step away from their roles as peaceful mothers or nurturers. She points to the term *Tegadalit* in Tigrinya, the language in Tigray, which means “a fighter or struggler in the present continuous... someone who *is* a fighter women, not someone who was in the past”, although the civil war of 1974-91 has already been thirty years ago (Baldwin, 2022: 30). Having fought in this civil war as a woman, continues to steer the

dynamics of the 2020-2022 war. Women's engagement is perceived of as highly necessary, and still defines the boundaries of *womanhood* in Tigray (Baldwin, 2022).

3.4.3. *Community-level mediators and human rights defenders*

It is crucial to recognize the prevalence and roots of grassroots movements (Salama Hub, 2023). Armed conflict often destroys established social fabrics, as happened with the destruction of peace initiative institutions in Tigray. Prior to the war of 2020–2022, women's associations played an active role in maintaining peace in their neighbourhoods in Tigray. They also led local reconciliation committees, promoting reconciliation and fostering understanding among community members. During the war however, many women-led organisations needed to shut down their activities. The focus was on survival, and there was little space for peacebuilding activities (Hailu et al., 2024). Some organisations did organise themselves in other, more humanitarian ways. For instance, the Tinsae Humanitarian Charity Organization (THCO) served as a committee for two years during the war, before it was reestablished as a NGO on November 22, 2022 (THCO, n.d.).

Since SGBV is widely used as a weapon of war in the Tigray War, women realise the importance of seeing their experiences reflected in peace processes. In the post-war recovery, Ethiopia has been pursuing to become a more gender-inclusive society, where women are included meaningfully in state-led transitional justice efforts such as the Ethiopian National Dialogue. Nevertheless, there is still a political gender gap that keeps women marginalised from peace processes, and while Ethiopia acknowledges the occurrence of SGBV during the war, it eliminates mentions of gender in its transitional justice initiative (Gusky & MacLean, 2024). In Ethiopia, transitional justice is difficult because of the profound distrust towards government institutions: “For survivors and for the Tigray community at large having to engage with the same institutions in this transitional justice work is retraumatizing and deeply unjust”, said Hilina Berhanu Degefa (Ergene & Buffum, 2025). A success story is the Coalition for Women's Voice in the National Dialogue (CWWND), which focuses on enhancing diversity in peacebuilding initiatives in Ethiopia. This network has currently 50 women-led CSOs and has consulted over 3000 women in Ethiopia to generate a women's agenda shared with the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission to include more women. Furthermore, it has trained 151 women as consultation facilitators (Ergene & Buffum, 2025).

Ethiopia has many women's movements that defend the interests of women and policymakers, and fight for more gender equality. In the post-war recovery period, these organisations focused on battling violence against women, advocating for women's political participation and women's inclusion in decision-making processes regarding transitional justice (Ergene & Buffum, 2025). The majority of these grassroots organizations take the shape of networks, alliances, groups, or organizations where women collaborate to settle disputes and produce tangible outcomes (Salama Hub, 2023). Financially supported by UN Women Ethiopia, the role of women-led CSOs in the realm of peace and security, peacebuilding and conflict resolution is further acknowledged (Ergene & Buffum, 2025). For instance, the Empathy for Life Integrated Development Association (EliDA), which calls itself "a women-led and Women right, non-profit, and board-led Indigenous National Civil Society Organization", advocates for women's leadership in peacebuilding, while strengthening democratic culture, including in Tigray. It provides grassroots mobilization, leadership training and pushes women into formal decision-making positions after conflict, such as in Tigray. There are also non-governmental organisations, such as the Network of Ethiopian Women's Associations (NEWA), a non-partisan, non-governmental organisation established in 2003 and the Ethiopian Human Rights Defenders Network (EHRDN). The Ethiopian Women Peace Builders (EWPB) was established in 2022 right before the end of the Tigray War, and is an inclusive organisation composed of different peacebuilding organisations throughout the country, which aims to coordinate activities of women peacebuilders, and to facilitate national, regional, grassroots and community-level actions linked to the implementation of the WPS National Action Plan in Ethiopia (Ethiopian Women Peacebuilders, 2022). There are many more organisations, some with a focus on empowering women, other more with a focus on getting justice or providing health and psychological care for SGBV survivors. However, listing all of them would not fit in this paragraph.

Since the Tigray War, internal fragmentation within the women's rights civic space has become more deepened and visible (Ergene & Buffum, 2025). While Paffenholz et al. (2015) have showed that women's engagement is better when forming coalitions and working on a shared agenda, this is a challenge for women's civil society organisations. If they can overcome these differences, a stronger front against violations of gender equality principles could be beneficial for a greater impact. Nevertheless, women-led CSOs face many difficulties in Ethiopia. Their full potential has been consistently hindered by the government in attempts to silence civil society. Additionally, there is a shrinking civic space in Ethiopia, which, considered with gender vulnerabilities, impacts women's civil society. During the Tigray war, Ethiopia's

prime minister Abiy Ahmed created a dangerous climate for civil society leaders and journalists by arresting and intimidating them. In 2024 five well-known human rights organisations in Ethiopia were suspended as part of this civic crackdown. This has led many women-led organizations to focus on state-approved “peace work”, which makes it difficult to change the system (Ergene & Buffum, 2025).

3.5. Women’s barriers to inclusion

When are women going to be considered as “first class” citizens and taken and heard seriously in nation building and peacebuilding at every level? (Siha Network, 2025)

Despite the international recognition of women’s roles in peacebuilding and associated policy, significant structural barriers for women’s actual inclusion persist. These ways range from exclusion from the negotiating tables, to having limited access to decision-making spaces, economical marginalisation and gendered divisions of labour. Patriarchal governance structures and legal frameworks further restrict women’s rights to political participation. Feminist scholars urge for an intersectional analysis wherein ethnicity, class, age, rural-urban divides and more identity markers are analysed in accordance with each other, to produce differentiated experiences among women and their limited inclusion of peace processes (Crenshaw, 1989; Puechguirbal, 2010). Institutional reform, an understanding of structural inequality and a transformation of social norms that underpin gendered exclusion are all necessary steps in the process of integrating more women in peacebuilding roles.

In Ethiopia, women’s participation in peace activities remains low. Only 0.9% of women serves as leaders or organizers and 15.5% as volunteers or participants. Furthermore, 45.9% of women said they were unable or unwilling to join in peace activities, whilst 37.7% said they were interested in doing so. Women's views and opinions are continuously underrepresented in the fields of conflict prevention, mediation, and post-conflict reconstruction, despite the crucial responsibilities they play in these areas. Deeper cultural injustices and patriarchal conventions that still prevent women from achieving senior roles in the military and in politics are reflected in this gender disparity. The report *Determining the Ethiopian women's status & priorities*

reveals that the main barriers in Ethiopia for participating in peace initiatives are social norms, limited education and limited access to resources (Hailu et al., 2024).

3.5.1. Political Exclusion and symbolical involvement

“The same men who are the perpetrators sit in the peace negotiations. Victims like women are not included. We want to give women a voice within the talks” (Kryshevich & Schmidjell, 2021: 6). According to Asia Abdulkadir, the wrong people get to participate in the decision-making process after a conflict. She stresses the importance of including women in peace negotiations, since this would positively affect the outcome. In Sudan, although the 2019 pro-democracy movement was women-led, women were mostly excluded from peacemaking efforts. “As we have seen in Sudan, fragmented peace processes sidelining women lead to limited agreements perpetuating the cycle of war”. Peace agreements involving women are 64% more likely to succeed (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.), but the men with guns still dominate peace processes in (post-)conflict societies (Abdi, 2023).

This is clearly visible in Tigray, where talks between the TPLF, and the Ethiopian federal government consisted broadly of individuals who took part in active fighting, instead of peacebuilding experts (Siha Network, 2025). The Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA), also called the Pretoria Agreement or the Ethiopia-Tigray peace agreement, is the agreement that put an official end to the Tigray war on 2 November 2022 (African Union, 2022) between the Federal Democratic People’s Republic of Ethiopia and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF). One of the three negotiators of the African Union (AU) during the Pretoria Agreement was Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, the former vice president of South-Africa. Notwithstanding the fact that Mlambo-Ngcuka does have much expertise regarding gender equality, women empowerment and peace processes through her expertise as vice president and at the UN, the critique that Ethiopian women’s voices were not included in the formation of the CoHA led to disappointment (Salama Hub, 2023). Women were almost fully excluded from participation in the negotiation process, with the exception of one woman on the government’s side (EC, 2023; Ergene & Buffum, 2025; UN Women, 2024). Appointees to mediation processes are typically those who currently or previously occupy prominent positions in fields where women constitute a clear minority, such as politics, diplomacy, or the military. Member States of the AU and IGAD frequently designate mediators from a predetermined pool of primarily male candidates when disputes emerge. As a result, women are underrepresented in official peace processes at the national, regional, and global levels (Salama Hub, 2023).

This is not only applicable to the inclusion of women in peace initiatives but is also noticeable in other fields in society. Although there is a constitutional guarantee of women's rights to political and leadership participation, there is often still a lack of government commitment in Ethiopia (Hailu et al., 2024). The government follows top-down approaches, with women-related topics being debated and determined at the highest level before being sent to local levels. These methods silence women's voices and prevent them from fully participating at the local level. In the region Amhara, for instance, a number of community talks and gatherings concerning peacebuilding were conducted, but the attendees were unable to openly express their opinions, and political dominance pervaded the gatherings. A sizable section of the populace is not participating in the decision-making processes that have a direct impact on their lives due to the underrepresentation of women in local governing organizations. A cycle of exclusion and disempowerment may be sustained if policies and initiatives fail to adequately address the needs and concerns of women as a result of this lack of diversity in leadership (Hailu et al., 2024). O'Reilly et al. (2015) see political will as the most difficult barrier to overcome in the inclusion of women in peace processes. After a conflict when the included parties gather at the decision-making table, a redistribution of power takes place. Peace processes often take place behind closed doors to restrict access to this power play. They point out that although there are discussions going on about conceptualisations of peace, the main barrier is to overcome this deeply underlying ideological resistance to women's participation in peace negotiations. "Many belligerents and those who wield power resist the participation of women". When it already comes to inclusion of women in peace processes, they are often reduced to symbolic participants, which diminishes their agency and diversity. When women are finally included, it is often merely symbolical, in the way that they can attend the decision-making table without having any authority to interfere with the process. Women are only included after strong advocacy and lobbying efforts for their participation (Paffenholz, 2015c). Furthermore, the shrinking civic space and attack on fundamental rights undermine women's ability to participate in peace processes even more (Salama Hub, 2023).

3.5.2. Patriarchal norms and gendered stereotypes

In Ethiopia, historical and cultural limitations have limited women's involvement in decision-making processes. Traditional gender norms, societal expectations, and the lack of female role models in leadership positions may all contribute to the trend of women actively seeking jobs

in local structures less frequently in comparison to men (Hailu et al., 2024). “In most cultures women are not allowed to speak up. Keeping quiet is even regarded as a quality, so there is a resistance from the side of the community, particularly in traditional patriarchal societies,” said Zebiba Musema, a member of the Ethiopian Women Human Rights Defenders Network (EWHRDN) (OHCHR, 2025).

On a global scale, women in conflict zones are mostly portrayed in stereotypical ways. In her paper about feminist approaches to peacebuilding, Donna Pankhurst (2003) questions the nature of gender politics in ‘post-conflict’ situations. She talks about the invisibility of women’s roles during war and other types of violent conflict. While men were cast as the ‘doers’, women were depicted as the passive, innocent, victims – of violence, displacement, sexual abuse – rather than as agents of change in conflict or peace processes. Similarly, Nina Wilén (2022) sees that women are often grouped into the vulnerable “women and children” category, and that they are often named together with people with disabilities, the sick, elderly and IDPs. This “victimhood narrative” diminishes women’s agency, reducing them to objects of protection rather than subjects with an own will, opinion, and set of skills. It reinforces understandings of war as masculine and excludes women from fully participating in peacebuilding and rebuilding the post-conflict society.

Other stereotypes lead back to the idea of inherent qualities of *femininity* (as opposed to *masculinity*, which also entails certain gender stereotypes) and the *peaceful woman* stereotype (Pierson, 1989). The assumption that all women are naturally peaceful is highly romanticised, and essentializes gender. It pushes women into the role of mothers, nurturers, or “mothers of the nation” (Pankhurst, 2003; Wilén, 2022). Pierson (1989) says that this is often linked to images of women as a ‘beautiful soul’, or as peaceful mothers (Cockburn, 2001). For instance, in the Sun City Agreement for the inter-Congolese negotiations from 2003, they urged parties to “restore the dignity of women so that they may fully assume their noble roles of wives, mothers, educators, custodians of social values and development agents”, which stresses the inherent moral superiority of women, whilst linking them to their role as nurturers and keeping them out of the public, political sphere (Wilén, 2022: 132).

Other notions of *femininity* are that women seek non-confrontational methods of conflict resolution, for the good of the collective, and passivity (United Nations, 1985; United Nations, 1995). This is why these inherently female qualities do not fit the war and conflict picture (Byrne et al., 1996; Ferris, 1993), which reproduces the idea that women are always pro-peace, anti-violence. Nevertheless, women are also guilty of violent acts during war. However, the

main narrative still sees violence as something inherently manly. These narrow identities often limit women's opportunities to take on other roles, diminish their agency and ultimately limit recognition for women who take up arms for political causes, play active roles in resistance or disagree with dominant liberal peacebuilding models. By listening more to women's experiences, it became clear that women play many more roles in wars than is often said, as workers, community leaders, negotiators, armed resistance, managing the household, ensuring food provision, social organisers, farmers, welfare workers, care takers, or fighters (Enloe, 2004; Pankhurst, 2003). Often they do not get recognition for their roles as care takers and social or political organisers, which is why their basic needs during post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation projects is not respected as much in comparison to men (Goldblatt & Meintjes, 1998). This is also the case in Ethiopia, where there is a clear gender-labour division and entrenched cultural biases, especially in rural areas (Hailu et al., 2024).

The main gendered war and conflict narratives reinforce these different social roles (Pankhurst, 2003). These dominant narratives are sustained through policy, media and the international development sector. Feminist scholars have long challenged these essentialist gender perspectives, and underline the importance of recognising structures of gendered hierarchies and power dynamics which sustain this depoliticization of women's agency (Enloe, 2014; Shepherd, 2017). Empowerment means dismantling these stereotypes, tackling the root causes of inequality and rebuilding systems where women's roles, voices and lived experiences can thrive on a central, instead of a peripheral, level to become inclusive and transformative peacebuilding frameworks (Pankhurst, 2003). Specifically for this research regarding Tigray, these narratives take on an intersectional nature and are linked to racialised and colonial logics, where African women in (post-)conflict-settings are often portrayed as symbols of suffering and dependency. Mama (1995, 2005) sees this as a way of marginalising African knowledge systems and women's leadership capacities in post-conflict reconstruction.

In different regions in Ethiopia, cultural barriers persist. In Afar, customary practices and external factors stand in the way of more political participation, in Amhara it is still difficult for women to enter higher-level positions. Conversely, the feminization of certain departments reinforced gender stereotypes and gender segregation, by relocating women to specific spheres while men are dominating others. Additionally, the percentage of Ethiopian women in leadership positions who are in a monogamous marriage remains low, while single women have a higher percentage of ending up in leadership positions. This could be due to traditional gender roles and societal expectations which serve as barriers to women's participation, but also to the

lack of female leaders to look up to. In Tigray, many of the women (53,3%) do not have any aspirations to partake in leadership positions, since this is not seen as culturally appropriate. Remarkably, Tigray has the highest rate in Ethiopia of uninterest of women in pursuing participation in peace processes, with 64,5% not being interested to participate at all. Women living in rural areas show slightly more interest in participating in peace initiatives (Hailu et al., 2024). Before the Tigray War, women's participation in traditional peace processes is often limited or non-existent, and women's roles in the Tigray region are characterized as "low and insignificant" (Bayu, 2020).

3.5.3. Intimidation of women in peace processes

In Ethiopia, the priority for women is to feel safe. 71,6% of the women prioritise peace and security over other needs, a number that reflects women's lived experiences against the backdrop of political instability, and the disproportionate impact conflict has on women. The Tigray war uprooted many women, who eventually ended up in IDP camps. In these IDP camps, there is a high lack of security, particularly for women and girls, and theft and harassment are the norm. Testimonies included in the 2024 report regarding Ethiopian women's status and priorities (Hailu et al., 2024) show the reality of some IDP centres in Mekelle.

women are robbed in broad daylight, unable to even use the restroom without fear of assault, and the absence of community forums to address security concerns has created a lawless environment where criminals thrive. The lack of basic infrastructure like protective fences and secure facilities further compounds the vulnerability of the displaced population, leaving them exposed to dangers both inside and outside the camps. Safety concerns extend beyond the camps, as highlighted by a participant who shared, 'I can't even sell a local drink without facing issues. Outlaws take advantage of services without payment, reflecting the absence of law and order. Even when criminals face the justice system, they often evade consequences, returning within weeks due to bribery or bail (Hailu et al., 2024: 124).

Only when there is a stable environment, the active involvement of women in peace and security governance becomes a possibility. It is not only a logical preference, but also an emotional reaction to the daily dangers women endure (Hailu et al., 2024). Additionally, Women engaged with higher positions or peace initiatives are often targeted. They face threats, harassment, intimidation and in some cases physical attacks (Salama Hub, 2023). Last, as mentioned before, women have suffered from the war facing SGBV. The weaponisation of SGBV during the war, led to the inability of women to actively participate in peacebuilding efforts (Hailu et al., 2024).

3.5.4. Resource and capacity barriers

There are certain barriers related to structural factors and inequalities. The numbers show that women in Tigray often have limited access to education, which leads to less employment opportunities and discriminatory practices in the labour market (Hailu et al., 2024). Ultimately this leads to capacity gaps in peacebuilding. As showed before, woman already have a difficult time to get access to official state-led peace initiatives, let alone if there is an educational disadvantage. The odds that women are therefore excluded are high, since mediators and negotiators demand a higher level of expertise, stature, and experience. Leadership-related capacity shortages limit women's involvement in peacebuilding initiatives, as well as their technical abilities, stakeholder mobilisation, public speaking, strategy and governance skills. On a state-level, this fosters a peacebuilding culture which is exclusive, elitist and male, since boys get more opportunities when it comes to education than girls (Ergene & Buffum, 2025).

Additionally, a lack of funding is one of the main obstacles to women's effective involvement in peace efforts. Most of their labour is voluntary and has a restricted scope. Young women and their organizations are primarily impacted by this, as they still need to build experience and a track record to compete for funding with more established peers. Unfortunately, to close this gap, development partners have not yet implemented flexible finance arrangements. The Tigray war has made it difficult for female entrepreneurs to recover their enterprises from the impact of the war (Hailu et al., 2024).

3.6. Conclusion

Linking global narratives to local realities, the case of the Tigray War shows discrepancies with main global narratives about women's roles in conflict. While the media and academic scholarship often write about Tigrayan women being victims of SGBV – which is a fact, since there was widespread SGBV – this chapter showed that Tigrayan women were also active in the TDF army as combatants, cooks, soldier, medical staff and more. Especially before and after the war, women took important roles of community-level mediators, civil society leaders and transitional justice advocates. There are probably many more roles Tigrayan women played, but this is just an illustrative overview to demonstrate my argument. Last, while the inclusion of women remains important in the quest for sustainable peace (Aggestam & Eitrem Holmgren, 2022), the case of Tigray shows that there still are many barriers in Ethiopia preventing this.

PART III: EU POLICY, WOMEN AND PEACEBUILDING DURING AND AFTER THE TIGRAY WAR

4. The EU's discourse and policy regarding the Tigray war

The goal of this chapter is to understand how the EU constructs women in relation to peacebuilding, specifically in the context of the Tigray War. The EU's external action is expressed through multiple institutions, which underlines the fact that "the EU" has many different faces, discourses, and ways of reflecting its normative agenda. Through the application of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (Lazar, 2005), as outlined in chapter 2, this chapter tries to understand how gender, power and knowledge are constructed through EU language. It is based on a selection of EU sources, such as European Parliament resolutions, conclusions of the European Commission (EC) and the Council of the EU, European External Action Service (EEAS) statements, and strategic frameworks. The documents are chosen because of their relevance to the EU's stance regarding the Tigray war (2020-2022), and for their institutional diversity, which allows for a cross-cutting discursive analysis. Themes were coded based on the theoretical framework outlined in chapter 1 (feminist peacebuilding, feminist critique on the WPS agenda and Normative power Europe) and maintain a triple focus on (1) to assess the representations of women through an analysis of how the EU frames concepts such as empowerment, intersectionality and gender-mainstreaming; (2) to examine the EU's close alignment with global frameworks such as the WPS agenda; (3) and to examine whether the EU's discourse as a promotor of gender norms has transformative value, in which women are not merely textually added to the discourse, but empowered through the EU's language use and promises.

4.1. The EU's entry point in the Tigray war

4.1.1. Europe and Africa relations

Europe has been playing a role in interfering in African dynamics for centuries. Perspectives on these ties range from colonialism, the role Africa has played in the history of Europe's integration and the parallel and convergent development of the two continents. After the

establishment of the EU, Africa is seen as a testing ground for the EU's ambitions as an actor on a global scale (Adebajo & Whiteman, 2012).

During the Berlin Conference of 1885, the "Scramble for Africa" took place. The European great powers individually challenged each other to obtain their preferred piece of territory on the African continent. Between the end of WWII and the beginning of the 2000s, the relation between the EU and African countries was mostly decided through economic partnerships between the EU and the ACP (African, Caribbean and Pacific) countries. This established an asymmetric relationship (Sastre Bel, 2025). The Lome IV Convention and the Cotonou agreements changed this power asymmetry in some ways by adding new values and domains, such as good governance, democracy and the need for "mediation, negotiation and reconciliation efforts" (European Commission, 2014: 26). The creation of the African Union in 2001 led to a more integrated and transregionally connected Africa, which in its turn resulted in being taken more seriously by other powers such like the EU (Haastrup et al., 2021). The AU has focused on further establishing its African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). Peace and security belong to the main concerns of the EU's interests in the African continent. The European Union Global Strategy (EUGS) of 2016 is a direct example of peace and security interest, since it calls for diplomacy, CSDP (Common Security and Defence Policy) and funds for development in order to manage conflict prevention and resolution in the African continent (Sastre Bel, 2025).

The Horn of Africa and Europe have longstanding ties, as well as colonial histories. The Horn belongs to the "external neighbourhood" of the EU, which does have an impact on threats and trends towards the EU: "Instability in this region implies not only often a tremendous suffering of African people but can also have a direct impact on the security of Europe and its citizens" (EP, 2022b). Some of these trends are mass migration, terrorism, maritime piracy, conflicts with Gulf States (de Waal & Ibreck, 2016). It borders the African regions of the Sahel and Central-Africa and fosters many different, often antagonistic, visions on particular issues (de Waal & Ibreck, 2016).

4.1.2. The EU in the Tigray War

In the case of Ethiopia, the EU is keen on maintaining a good relationship with the biggest country in the Horn of Africa (Council of the European Union, 2021a), although the country's policy before 2018 did not fit the EU's framework regarding human rights. When Abiy Ahmed became prime minister in 2018, he made promises on more civil and political freedoms. The

new prime minister backed a female candidate for president, abolished limitations on the media, released thousands of political prisoners, formed a ministry of peace, and nominated a gender-parity cabinet shortly after taking office. When Abiy Ahmed pushed for a peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea in July 2018, which put an end to a two-decade-long intermittent conflict over boundary disputes, the favourable sentiment toward him grew. In 2019, Abiy Ahmed even won the Nobel Peace Prize and was praised in most European cities and international forums as a reformist, regional unifier, and peacemaker (Caruso & Akamo, 2024), who contributed to relaunching EU-Ethiopia and EU-Africa engagement (Caruso & Akamo, 2023).

Caruso & Akamo (2024) point out how difficult it was for the EU to act effectively and consistently in the war in Tigray, a region which is highly fragmented. The EU failed to develop a deep, contextual understanding about the actors and dynamics of the conflict and relied too much on pre-existing relations with the TPLF, instead of putting in enough efforts to fully prepare itself by the outbreak of the conflict. Caruso & Akamo (2024) show how the EU shifted its stance from a highly normative approach towards the Ethiopian federal government, to a more pragmatic outlook when it was already too late. The multiple institutions responsible for EU's foreign policy were unable to provide a clear and combined approach, which led to the EU not implementing any real mitigation measures. Furthermore, the EU did not participate in the multipolar competition to gain influence in Ethiopia and effectively mitigate the Tigray crisis.

When the Tigray war broke out, Josep Borrell, the EU High Representative/Commission Vice-President (HR/VP) expressed his great concern for the humanitarian situation, ethnic violence and human rights violations happening in Tigray (EEAS, 2020). the EU decided to support innocent civilians and provide humanitarian support, rather than being on the government's side. Diplomatic persuasion did not seem to work, which led to financial ramifications; the EU withdrew 88 million euros in development aid (Borrell, 2021; Pichon, 2022). Three requirements were attached by the EU to the withholding of help: i) a truce; ii) humanitarian access to the districts of Afar and Amhara, where most of the displaced population was unable to receive relief; and iii) accountability for the crimes committed during the conflict (Marks, 2020). The EU applied sanctions for the Asmara government, when it became clear which role Eritrea partook in siding with the government.

The publication of a report by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in November 2021 openly showed the complex reality and the atrocities the different actors of the conflict had committed. The Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF), Eritrean Defence Force (EDF) and Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) were guilty of attacks on civilians, ill-treatment, torture, unlawful killings, disappearances and acts of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) (UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2021). This again led to a change in the EU's stance. By July 2022, the EU gave 80 million euros of finances for the purpose of health care and education, specifically for the targeted region of Tigray. After the CoHA peace agreement, the EU gave 650 million euros worth of assistance to the country, which was the first aid package by the EU since the Tigray war, and which was according to Caruso & Akamo (2024) arguably late. The narrative of the EU sounds different: "During the two-year war in northern Ethiopia, the EU has consistently supported the Ethiopian population" (EC, 2024e).

Although Sastre Bel (2025) states that the EU has the right instruments to become a *multi-mediator*, he also acknowledges that, now, it cannot act as a mediator outside of its neighbourhood. The engagement of the EU was not meaningful enough to consider the EU an essential actor in the peace process that led to the Pretoria Agreement, and the EU was also rejected as an observer by the Ethiopian Federal Government during the Pretoria Agreement. Sastre Bel (2025: 15) stresses that "the EU first needs to clarify the image it wants to project of itself and then commit to it". These conflicting narratives about the EU's engagement in the Tigray war show that there is more at play. Specifically for this research, the EU's stances as a promotor of empowering women in peacebuilding will be evaluated.

4.2. The EU as a global norm setter

While Tigrayan women faced systematic exclusion (chapter 3), the European Union has had the ambition to promote and export values and norms, which makes the EU a distinct foreign policy actor (L. Aggestam, 2008; Maes & Debusscher, 2022; Mannes, 2002; Saltnes, 2020). The European Union is often perceived of, and presents itself, as an actor with normative power. This means an actor whose external influence is based on the promotion of certain values: "The European Union promotes gender equality, human rights, peace and security within and beyond its borders" (EC and HR, 2020). On the Conference "Women for Peace in the Horn of Africa",

which took place between the 10th and the 12th of June 2021, Rachel Ibreck pleaded for an inclusion of civic and women's networks to end the EU's "inconsistent policies" (Kryshevich & Schmidjell, 2021: 9). While she views the EU's regional approach as positive, it still has many double standards and contradictions in its politics in the Horn of Africa (HoA). The EU supports the human rights and justice architecture of the AU and IGAD, tries to support civil society organisations, women in leadership positions, funds programs to battle sexual violence and provides humanitarian aid. At the same time however, the EU has its own goals it strives for in the HoA, which are mostly in the field of regulating migration, or security narratives connected to violence, conflict, and displacement. Ideally, Ibreck says that the EU should develop a human security strategy for the Horn of Africa, one that surpasses merely the political regional institutional bodies of the region, and which includes civil society and – more specifically - women's organisations, networks, and initiatives in a post-conflict context (Kryshevich & Schmidjell, 2021).

Although the EU launched its first Gender Action Plan (GAP) already in 2010, it was only in 2019, when Ursula von der Leyen became the first female-head of the European Commission, that gender equality became a major point on the agenda (EC, 2020a; Maes & Debusscher, 2022). the goal was to construct a "Union of Equality", not only within the EU, but also through its external action. "Gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls continue to be a top priority in our international cooperation and development" (EC, 2019.; Maes & Debusscher, 2022). The EU thus sees itself as a promotor of gender norms (EC, 2020a; EC and HR, 2020). Three of its most relevant gender related frameworks are the *Gender Action Plan III (GAP III) (2021-2025)* (EC and HR, 2020), *the EU's strategic approach to the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda* (Council of the European Union, 2018b), and the *EU's Action plan on WPS (2019-2024)* (EEAS, 2019). This policy architecture provides normative grounding and guidance to analyse EU discourse regarding Ethiopia. Together they establish EU's normative identity as a gender-progressive actor and highlight its commitments. Some patterns emerge in these more gender frameworks regarding the representation of women, the framing of empowerment and silences regarding local agency, and a comparison between these more general frameworks and Ethiopia/Tigray-specific documents is important.

4.2.1. Promotor of gender norms

The EU's Gender Action Plans (GAPs) are guidelines which are of a global nature and serve as a normative basis for gender in EU external action. In its *EU gender action plan (GAP) III - An ambitious agenda for gender equality and women's empowerment in EU external action (2021-2025)*, it states that: "The EU is a global front-runner in promoting gender equality as a key political objective of its external action and common foreign and security policy" (EC and HR, 2020: 2). The title lays out the objectives of the document and puts the emphasis on EU external action.

Drawing from the EU gender equality strategy 2020-2025, which calls for a gender-equal Europe, this new EU gender action plan for 2021-2025 (GAP III) calls for a gender-equal world... It will scale up the EU contribution to reach SDG 5 in all EU internal and external policy areas and across the 2030 agenda. (EC and HR, 2020: 2)

A main goal of GAP III is that by 2025, gender equality will be a cross-cutting priority, which will be visible in at least 85% of all new external actions and maintain an intersectional lens. On a broader scale, the EU puts gender equality as its main priority for the sake of complying to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda. To do so, the EU follows a "three-pronged approach" in its gender policy, by combining gender mainstreaming, targeted actions and political dialogue. Similarly, The *EU Strategic Approach to WPS* (2018) provides a basis for realising equality between women and men, which is "a fundamental value of the European Union" by engaging, empowering, protecting, and supporting women and girls to achieve peace and security.

"Building on its authority and convening power", The EU stresses how alliances and partnerships are key to strengthen international commitments on gender equality, women's rights and empowerment. Initiating, sponsoring and co-sponsoring the inclusion of gender-responsive language in all resolutions and declarations could help strengthen the meaning of international gender norms, and tackle global challenges (EC and HR, 2020). Similarly, the EU opts for "promoting the implementation of international standards of gender-responsive mediation support". Peace processes are opportunities to promote women's empowerment, gender equality, gender mainstreaming and the meaningful and equitable participation of women.

The EU values its own power as normatively strong on a global scale, and that it sees the necessity for a commitment to share its values regarding gender equality with other parts of the world. It claims to be a norm-setter, and values the international frameworks which have, in the eyes of the EU, universal values (e.g. SDGs). This is why Ian Manners (2002) coined the concept of Normative Power Europe (NPE), which is discussed in chapter 1 of this thesis.

In Ethiopia, the EU promotes peacebuilding, dialogue, civic education, gender equality, and women's empowerment through various initiatives (EU Delegation to Ethiopia, 2024). With GAP III and the EU Youth Action Plan as guidelines, the EU ensures gender equality through the promotion of women, girls and youth in Ethiopia's political, social and economic life. In the context of the Tigray war and post-conflict reconstruction in Ethiopia, this self-image is projected through statements, policy conclusions, diplomatic interventions and funding programmes. Examining the EU's discourse allows for an assessment of the EU's normative commitments – mostly based on the WPS agenda – are consistently and contextually integrated into its external actions, or if these values are purely depending on the EU's own strategic interests.

4.2.2. *Protector*

The *EU Strategic approach to WPS* (2018) emphasizes “the need for concrete commitments and actions as well as the need to engage, empower, protect, and support women and girls”, which puts the EU's main objectives in the spotlight. The main goal is to achieve sustainable and lasting peace and security to become sustainable development, which is in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its SDGs and the Consensus for Development. “The WPS Agenda also emphasises the need to prevent and protect women and girls from sexual and gender-based violence” (Council of the European Union, 2018b: 15). While the EU closely follows WPS as a guideline, this means that the EU also sees it as its responsibility to protect women and girls from SGBV. An EP resolution (2022) regarding Tigray “urges the EU and its states to fully engage with the peace process in order to ensure its credible progress”, which stresses this responsibility even more. “In order to ensure its credible progress” could be interpreted as: if the EU does not engage with the peace process in Tigray, it will not be credible. The reality however showed that the EU failed to show up in time as an engaging actor leading up to the Pretoria Agreement (Caruso & Akamo, 2024; Sastre Bel, 2025).

Although there are some quotations which could be seen as overly protective and normative behaviour of the EU institutions – which in its turn also essentialises women to vulnerable and helpless victims – Most of the analysed documents of the EU prove to have legitimate concerns. The protection narrative of the EU is more present in cases where women end up in higher peacebuilding positions.

Support women's leadership, the participation of women's organizations and women human rights defenders who are working in conflict-related settings and/or in conflict prevention, countering violent extremism, peace negotiations and peacebuilding, humanitarian action and development programmes, through bilateral and multilateral diplomacy including statements as well as regular consultations with them in EU-led, and supported, processes. (EEAS, 2019: 7)

The council explicitly supports women who are working in conflict settings and are threatened because of that. The Council (2022: 7) states that “The EU and its Member States commit to seek understanding of and to act on the gender dimensions of the security risks to avoid exacerbating vulnerabilities, but also to uncover new entry points for advancing gender equality, improving resilience and sustaining peace”. In the Council Conclusions on WPS, The Council:

condemns the increasing reprisals, violence, threats and attacks against women and girls, both offline and online, in particular targeting women human rights defenders, women journalists, women peacebuilders, women-led organisations, politically active women, women trade unionists, women forced into displacement and migration, and all other women and girls in conflict and crisis affected settings, not least in Afghanistan, Colombia, Ethiopia, Myanmar, Sudan, Syria and Yemen (Council of the European Union, 2022: 4)

The Council shows that especially women who take on leadership roles, suffer a backlash. In 2022, Ethiopia is one of the seven named examples in the *Council Conclusions on WPS* (2022) This lack of political space for women to challenge gender relations is thus still a barrier for women to participate in peace processes after wars, which is something Donna Pankhurst pointed out already more than two decades ago (2003: 161).

4.3. Structural inequalities and intersectional framings

Women are not only victims of war and violence. They also play diverse roles as, for example, combatants, peace builders, politicians, economic actors and activists. The equal participation of women and men is both an essential end and a way to prevent and resolve conflicts and promote a culture of inclusive and sustainable peace. (Council of the European Union, 2018b: 34)

One of the main guiding principles of feminist peacebuilding theory is the application of an intersectional lens, and a profound contextual understanding which lays bare the root-causes of the conflict. The major barriers to inclusion in Ethiopia have been discussed in chapter 3 (3.4.) and are thematically grouped into (1) *political exclusion and symbolical involvement*, (2) *patriarchal norms and gendered stereotypes*, (3) *intimidation of women in peace processes* and (4) *resource and capacity barriers*. There are certainly more than the mentioned ones, such as institutional barriers. Furthermore, a root-cause understanding and intersectional approach is necessary to critically examine portrayals of women. It links gender to other indicators of identity, including sexual orientation, religion, age, class, and race. Understanding how the effects of colonialism, marginalization, and ethnopolitical conflicts influence women's efforts to peacebuilding can be aided by an intersectional study.

As seen in chapter 1, feminist peacebuilding theorists point at underlying gendered assumptions and essentialist stereotypes that are part of peacebuilding narratives, especially in an African context (Mama, 1995, 2005; Shepherd, 2016). Essentialist portrayals reinforce traditional gender roles and reaffirm existing power relations. Women in international policy discourse are often perceived of as helpless victims, active agents, or are left out of discourses. These representations of “women” are rarely differentiated, and tend to appear homogenously, without attention to class, ethnicity, rural-urban divides, or political affiliation. This risks reducing the diversity in roles women can play in (post)-conflict settings. Representation of women is not neutral, since it frames women’s roles, determines definitions of peace and peacebuilding, who is recognised as a legitimate peacebuilder, and how gender equality is operationalised and utilised for a political purpose. Chapter 3 has showed us that women took on many more roles during the Tigray war, and that the mere victimisation of women is not helpful for letting women have the agency they deserve.

Through an analysis of these representations of women in EU discourse on Tigray and more broadly Ethiopia, we can find out which existing stereotypes are being reinforced or fought against, if women are framed as victims or active participants in peacebuilding measures, and how this reflects broader feminist critiques of liberal peacebuilding and the interference of external actors in peacebuilding.

4.3.1. Women as victims of conflict

As discussed in chapters 1 and 3, the victimhood narrative is still dominant in the literature regarding women's roles in conflicts. In many cases, this is linked to the occurrence of SGBV. In response to the Tigray war, CLIP states that:

There is a need to overcome the dominant image in relation to women and conflict (that of victimisation and vulnerability), to recognise their significant but usually invisible contributions as well as ensuring their active participation and decision-making in formal and traditional peace processes as stated in the UN SC Resolution 1325 (EC, 2023: 4)

This victimisation is especially visible in the resolutions of the European Parliament (EP). While the first resolution of the parliament regarding the Tigray War did not say one word about women, gender, or sexual violence (EP, 2020). The second resolution of the EP, *European Parliament resolution of 7 October 2021 on the humanitarian situation in Tigray*, did talk about women and SGBV (EP, 2021), based on the Amnesty International Report "I don't know if they realized I was a person" which is about SGBV in the Tigray War (Amnesty International, 2021). In the third EP resolution, the *European Parliament resolution on the recent humanitarian and human rights situation in Tigray, Ethiopia, notably that of children*, women are only named in relation to SGBV:

whereas vulnerable groups, in particular women and children, are suffering the most from the ongoing conflict in Tigray and are in urgent need of protection; whereas women and children are continually the targets of intended and unintended bombings, shootings, killings and other acts of violence in the war and ethnic violence being perpetrated by all sides of the conflict; whereas rape and other sexual violence against women and girls continue to be widely used by all the belligerents, in addition to death threats, the use of ethnic slurs and captivity for sexual slavery; whereas internally displaced refugee women and children are at a heightened risk of abduction and trafficking for sexual exploitation (EP, 2022a: 4).

In this EP resolution, women are consistently pushed into categories of vulnerable groups and targets of violent attacks. “In urgent need of protection” points at the EU’s protection narrative. Furthermore, the sexual violence against women during the Tigray war is recognised. Notwithstanding the fact that this is an important fact, the reality of this document shows that women are only portrayed here in a secondary, victim position, rather than the part they could play as agents of change. Terms such as “agency” or “empowerment” are not used in the document, and “women” are instrumentalised to show the devastating effects of the war.

From 20-22 September 2022, MEPs from the Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM) and the Committee on Development (DEVE) were in Addis Ababa. There they discussed the situation in Tigray and Ethiopia regarding SGBV. Robert Biedroń, the chair of the FEMM Committee urged not to use rape as a weapon of war, and stated that “It is always women and children that bear the brunt of any crisis and further suffering of these innocent victims should be prevented” (EP, 2022c). Although facts of SGBV should not be ignored, this shows how the EU in some cases is prone to fall back into the “vulnerable victim” narrative of women.

The overarching gender frameworks of the EU counter these EP resolutions. The *EU Strategic Approach to Women, Peace and Security (2018)*⁶ brings about a more nuanced picture of SGBV: “Although women and girls face a higher risk of sexual violence, of becoming the domestic and sexual slaves of combatants and of being forced into marriages, men and boys can also be targeted as victims of such violence. In addition, men and boys may face further risks of forced recruitment and targeted killings” (Council of the European Union, 2018b: 34). Nevertheless, “sexual and gender-based violence disproportionately affects women of all ages across every phase of the peace and conflict continuum (although this is often exacerbated during violent conflict) (Council of the European Union, 2018b). In the *EU Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) 2019-2024* – which is the practical component of the EU’s Strategic approach to WPS⁷ - the EEAS speaks of support to “women, men, boys and girls who are survivors/victims of conflict-related SGBV in accessing reparations and restorative justice in a survivor/victim-centred approach” (EEAS, 2019). This shows of a more gender-neutral

⁶ The EU Strategic Approach to WPS (2018) sketches the long-term vision for the implementation of WPS principles across all Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) actions.

⁷ The Action Plan on WPS (2019-2024) is the practical component of the EU’s Strategic approach to WPS and translates commitments and promises into action.

approach, in which SGBV is addressed not only as something that happens to women, but something that could also happen to men and boys. The survivor/victim-centred approach implies a shift in the narrative: instead of consistently using the terminology of *victim*, the EEAS stresses the importance of also speaking of *survivor*, a term which carries more empowerment. Furthermore, the EEAS urges to “engage in concrete actions to prevent stigma and ensure that survivors/victims, including children born of rape, are not re-victimised, rejected or ostracised” (EEAS, 2019), which shows that the EEAS is aware that people who were once victims, are not permanent victims, and that they should be free of social stigmatisation. The EEAS recognises the importance of challenging dominant stigmas regarding victims/survivors of SGBV to avoid ending up in an endless cycle of revictimization, and in its turn, a lower credibility to claim agency for victims/survivors, and of women, girls and children born of rape.

In the Joint Statement following the roundtable on the humanitarian emergency in Tigray, Ethiopia (June 2021), the EC speaks of “widespread sexual violence” without linking it to gender. “Women” is not used once in the document, which shows the EC’s awareness of gender-neutral language in official statements. Further on gender-neutral language regarding SGBV, is the *Country Level Implementation Plan (CLIP) of Ethiopia* (EC, 2023):

The war in the northern regions of the country has resulted in widespread gender-based violence (GBV), with rape being used as a weapon of war. In addition, SGBV survivors have limited access to medical and social services and justice due to its invalidity and the risk of stigma and fears (EC, 2023: 4).

Here, the term “SGBV survivors” is used, which is both gender neutral and empowering, by choosing *survivor* over *victim*. CLIP acknowledges the weaponisation of rape during the Tigray war, as discussed in chapter 3 (Baldwin, 2022, 2024). Furthermore, it highlights the power of social stigmatisation of SGBV survivors, which leads to restricted access to medical and social services and justice

4.3.2. Women’s diverse roles

The diversity of roles women can play in (post-)conflict settings is celebrated and clearly pinpointed in many EU policy documents. Already in 2014, the *National Indicative Programme of Ethiopia (2014-2020)* (2014) stated that women will be considered not only “as a vulnerable group with special needs but as actors and interlocutors within the development and decision-making processes” (European Commission, 2014: 6). Throughout the EU Strategic approach to

WPS (2018), the diversity of women's roles is recognised multiple times: "the common EU understanding is based on the recognition of the fact that women and men fulfil many diverse roles in their communities and across the peace and conflict cycle" (Council of the European Union, 2018b). This is what the EU calls "applying a holistic perspective", which is visible in a more extensive explanation of diversifying women's roles:

The roles of many women, particularly young women, in society continue to be restricted. While women's security and safety remain the key objectives, an exclusive focus on protection potentially reinforces the exclusive perception of women and girls as passive victims of conflict and overlooks gender-related root causes of violence. While it is important to acknowledge and address women's and girls' differentiated experiences of conflict, including sexual and gender-based violence, it is imperative to support their peacebuilding work and engage them as actors and agents for peace. However, women should not automatically be assumed to be peacemakers, as they play diverse roles in conflict and can also be combatants and perpetrators of violence. A differentiated approach to conflict is necessary (Council of the European Union, 2018b: 16).

The self-reflexivity of the Council of the EU in this paragraph of the *EU's Strategic Approach to WPS* (2018) sketches the contrary of the dominant victimhood-narrative. The Council proves that it knows women and girls are usually targeted and require "protection", but "an exclusive focus on protection reinforces the exclusive perception of women and girls as passive victims of conflict and overlooks gender-related root causes of violence". Besides seeing women as more than passive victims, this paragraph addresses the root causes of violence, the differentiated experiences of conflict (of which SGBV is a part), and the necessity to recognise and support women as "actors and agents for peace". The nuance added stresses how women cannot be seen as peacemakers (*peaceful woman* stereotype, Pierson's "beautiful soul" (1989) chapter 3) and recognises women's roles as combatants or perpetrators in conflict. The Council urges to entail a differentiated approach to conflicts, which leaves room for different roles for women during and after conflicts (Council of the European Union, 2018b). The Council also highlights the transformative value of women's voices in peacebuilding:

As key providers of daily livelihood, as farmers and educators, women can use their voices and influence to accelerate lasting transformational solutions for sustainable development and shape equitable policies and resource allocation. Empowering women as drivers of economic growth strengthens societal resilience. (Council of the European Union, 2018b: 32)

The EU's *Gender Action Plan III (2021-2025)* (EC and HR, 2020) builds further on this diversity of women's roles in conflicts: Women are often victims but not always; they play multiple and diverse roles as combatants, peacebuilders, mediators, politicians, business women and activists... Increasing the participation of women in all matters related to peace and security is a priority to the EU (EC and HR, 2020). This illustrates the knowledge and commitment of the EU to change the narrative of women merely as victims during conflicts, to a multiplicity of roles women can play during and after conflicts.

On the website of the European Commission, Team Europe supports Ethiopia in its national Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programme and peacebuilding efforts, including the National Dialogue process. One of the main measures is the promotion of "inclusive and gender sensitive reconciliation and peacebuilding, providing relief for conflict affected communities in Tigray" (EC, n.d.). This shows the EU's ambitions to empower, and to understand the gendered dynamics of the Tigray war. Nevertheless, the wording of "providing relief" leads back to the EU being a normative actor who wants to protect.

4.3.3. Intersectionality in EU Discourse

The Country Level Implementation Plan (CLIP) points out that in Ethiopia, "Women are underrepresented in peacebuilding and conflict-resolution initiatives, despite the existence of both formal and customary mechanisms for women's participation in conflict resolution" (EC, 2023: 4). Officially, Ethiopian women should be able to play a more important role in peacebuilding and conflict-resolution. Nevertheless, despite the presence of gender quota, there are somehow still barriers: it is exactly these structural inequalities which prevent women from having an equal representation as men. The Council of the EU states that too little attention has been given to the gender-related drivers and root causes of violent and armed conflict, especially in comparison to the impacts of violent conflict (women as vulnerable *victims*). A recognition of the intersection of identity markers is a first necessary step:

An example is the key understanding of how gender norms and roles feed into conflict, as is focusing more deeply on the interplay between different intersecting elements of identities such as age, race, ethnicity, nationality, social class, sexual orientation, ability, religion or belief, urban/rural setting and gender. (Council of the European Union, 2018)

Furthermore, most of the EU institutions are aware of the importance of addressing the root causes and the barriers to inclusion for women. The EEAS explicitly aims to "support efforts

that address the root causes of violence, including SGBV, such as exclusion, structural inequalities, human rights violations, poor governance, socio-economic factors, toxic gender-related behaviours, harmful gender ideologies and gender-based discrimination” (EEAS, 2019: 3). In Ethiopia,

gender stereotypes also affect boys and men when it comes to straying from masculine norms or trying to live up to the male role as provider and protector of the family... The topic and the quest for non-toxic masculinities is rarely discussed (EC, 2023)

Gender norms must change before a real change can take place in the field of peacebuilding, and traditional notions of femininity and masculinity should be challenged. The Council of the EU is aware of the necessity to challenge and transform gender stereotypes, and dominant notions of femininity and masculinity: “the EU Strategic Approach engages men and boys as positive agents for change, addressing the need to address and transform gender stereotypes and societal exclusion mechanisms” (Council of the European Union, 2018b). GAP III does the same: “by actively engaging men and boys and by putting a focus on young people in general as drivers of change, the EU tries to promote a change in social attitudes (EC and HR, 2020). This focus on positive masculinity and a shared responsibility for men and boys for challenging gender stereotypes lessens the burden for women and girls. The Council also warns for the power of technology to create “new pathways for violence and abuse” and reinforce and normalise gender roles and cultural customs.

The online world is not just a mirror image, but a ‘hall of mirrors’ of the offline world, reflecting and amplifying the positive and negative. For women and girls, this mirror image often reflects a culture of misogyny, marginalisation and violence. (Council of the European Union, 2018b: 35)

This shows the power of gender stereotypes, and how easily they are reproduced and reinforced. In Ethiopia, certain attitudes and beliefs reinforce unequal gender roles. “Persistent gender stereotypes, traditional and religious beliefs and norms define women by motherhood and household responsibilities. HTPs [Harmful Traditional Practices] including child marriage, early pregnancy and FGM [Female Genital Mutilation] (affecting about 65% of Ethiopian women in 2016), SGBV (23% of women between the ages of 15 and 49 having experienced physical or sexual violence with high rates of domestic violence) are widespread” (EC, 2023).

One way to challenge these stereotypes is to take women more seriously, and to step away from the homogenization of women's voices. The Council of the EU celebrates this multiplicity of voices:

Women are often expected to speak with one voice, as if they were a homogeneous group, rather than expressing the wide range of experiences, fields of expertise and opinions one would expect from any diverse group of people with different interests, aspirations, ideals, values, motivations and needs. While (some) women may be consulted, too many are (still) excluded from any meaningful and equitable decision-making processes, locally, nationally, regionally and internationally. (Council of the European Union, 2018)

The Council goes against essentialising women and perceiving of women as one homogenous group, with only one voice. The urge to involve women from diverse backgrounds and different political, economic, security and social issues on their mind is dominant in the EU Strategic approach's discourse. Additionally, when certain topics make it to the agenda, these topics are often not taken seriously or put off as 'women's issues', especially in the case of SGBV. Last, there are often also differences in authority between women, and it is often only the elite urban women who gets to participate (Council of the European Union, 2018).

The intersectionality of individuals is highlighted as well in EU discourse. GAP III shows that the "Focus should also be on the most disadvantaged women, for instance indigenous peoples and persons belonging to racial/ethnic/religious minorities, forcibly displaced, migrant, economically and socially deprived women, those living in rural and coastal areas, as they face multiple discrimination. Specific challenges for girls and of elderly women should be considered" (EC and HR, 2020). Furthermore, the plan also urges to keep women with disabilities, or people from the LGBTIQ community in mind. The Council continues this intersectional approach to individuals:

Pay specific attention to the human rights of children, young and older people, those living in poverty, people with visible and non-visible disabilities, people belonging to minorities and indigenous peoples, refugees, internally displaced people and asylum seekers in vulnerable situations/contexts. (Council of the European Union, 2018b).

In the EP resolution regarding the humanitarian situation in Tigray (2022), this intersectional approach is visible:

[The European Parliament] calls for action against the abduction, trafficking and sexual exploitation of refugees and internally displaced persons in Tigray, Amhara, Afar and Eritrea, and for the provision of assistance and protection is provided to all victims, without discrimination on grounds of race or ethnicity, nationality, disability, age, gender or sexual orientation. (EP, 2022a: 6)

As seen before, the EP was the cited source which pushed women into a victim role. Nevertheless, here the victimisation is more gender-neutral, and mainly concerns the fate of IDP's in Tigray. It urges to take care of the victims, regardless of their different backgrounds or identities.

4.4. Local agency and grassroots women's peacebuilding

4.4.1. Recognition of grassroots women's roles

The EU frequently stresses the importance local agency and grassroots movements in peacebuilding practices. In its MIP of Ethiopia, it states that “engagement of civil society and traditional and modern grass-roots movements is of paramount importance for the implementation of the Peacebuilding component” (EC, 2024e). Specifically related to the participation of women, the Council stresses how civil society can play a critical role in increasing the legitimacy of peace processes and winning potential allies.

Women leaders and women's groups are often effective in peacemaking at community levels and should therefore be strongly linked to the high-level mediation process. In addition, women's access to leadership within civil society may be a challenge. The EU should therefore support the meaningful participation of inclusive civil society and women's associations in peace processes. (Council of the European Union, 2018b)

Although the *EU's Strategic Approach to WPS* already stressed the importance of women's groups at community levels in 2018, today there are still many barriers to the participation of women in high-level mediation processes. The Council is aware of the difficulties for women's inclusion and urges to support civil society. “Recognising that women's peace efforts at the local and national levels are critical for conflict resolution, peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction, the EU will support these initiatives, including at the grassroots level” (Council of the European Union, 2018b).

The EU sees itself as a supporter of women's peace initiatives on all levels, *including* on the grassroots level. The EU stresses this explicitly, since it is often seen as a top-down actor which only operates on an institutional level.

Actively engaging civil society organisations, including women's rights organisations and local and international women's groups, throughout the policy cycle (from design to evaluation) as opposed to a 'tick-the-box' exercise for consultation or implementation only. (Council of the European Union, 2018b: 20)

This stresses the fact that the EU is aware of the power of grassroots and women's movements, and that, in its discourse, it does not merely want to base itself on institutional beliefs. Including women from design to evaluation is stressed in the importance of women's meaningful participation in chapter 3 (O'Reilly et al., 2015, 2015; Shepherd, 2017). It aims at "addressing challenges linked to institutional approaches to gender mainstreaming, including resistance, lack of understanding and training, and maintenance of the status quo" (Council of the European Union, 2018b), which shows the EU's self-awareness of ending up in the pitfall of instrumentalization. Nevertheless, the context of shrinking civic space in Ethiopia could be a barrier for the EU to work together with CSOs.

4.5. Empowerment and the WPS agenda

The importance of empowering women as peacebuilders and including them in all peace and security related topics is widely recognised in EU documents. The EU highly praises the WPS agenda and uses it as a guideline through its policies. Gender-inclusive language has become part of the main gender frameworks, especially in the more recent ones such as the EU's Strategic Approach to WPS (2018) and GAP III. Nevertheless, the question remains: does the EU's discourse carry transformative value for the empowerment of women as peacebuilders, or is it rather instrumental for the sake of the EU's image? Second, many feminist peacebuilders critique the WPS agenda, what does it mean that the EU praises the WPS agenda in all its gender-related documents?

4.5.1. The EU's praise of the WPS agenda

UNSCR 1325 and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda offers a normative framework for empowering women's roles in conflict prevention, resolution and post-conflict reconstruction. While EU policy documents cite the importance of empowerment and participation, the actual commitment varies. Additionally, as seen in chapter 1, there is a growing number of feminist theorists criticizing the worth of the WPS agenda. The praise for the WPS agenda in many of the analysed EU documents is easily noticeable. For instance, the Council in *EU's Strategic Approach to WPS (2018)*:

The WPS Agenda, consisting of UNSCR 1325 (2000) and its follow-up UNSC Resolutions, broadens the scope of traditional security policy by highlighting the importance of the gender dimension in peace and security. As such, it embodies and catalyses an important paradigm shift in how security and peace should be achieved and sustained. It focuses not only on protecting women and girls from conflict-related violence but also on women's right to participate in decision-making processes. The WPS Agenda stresses that gender equality is embedded in peace and security issues, and that gender perspectives are integral to peace and security. In addition, it states that addressing the gender-related root causes of violence is critical to preventing conflicts. (Council of the European Union, 2018b: 2)

“It embodies and catalyses an important paradigm shift in how security and peace should be achieved and sustained”, shows the power WPS holds in the eyes of the Council in the field of peace and security. The Council sees WPS to achieve more sustainable peace and underlines the inextricable link between gender equality and peace and security related issues, while acknowledging the necessity to understand root causes to prevent conflicts.

The years after the EU's Strategic Approach (2018), the popularity of the WPS agenda did not fade in the EU institutions. The EEAS stresses that “the EU plays an active role globally, regionally, nationally and locally, in conflict-prevention and the WPS approach is cardinal to its success” (EEAS, 2019). Not only is the EU's normative identity highlighted here, the WPS guidelines are praised in EU's construction of a provider and exporter of gender norms. The EC's *Multiannual Indicative Programme (MIP): Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (2024-2027)* (2024) also has a clear articulation of the integration of the WPS agenda (EC, 2024). “To implement the WPS agenda, specific attention will be given to women's and girls' rights organisations, peacebuilding organisations, feminist organisations, and women human rights defenders” (EC, 2024e). Although the WPS Agenda is mainly focused on the gender-conflict nexus,

its relevance is not limited to conflict situations. It aims to ensure that the rights, agency and protection of women and girls are observed and upheld before, during, and after conflict, and that a meaningful and equitable role in decision-making is secured for women of all ages during all stages of peace making and peacebuilding (Council of the European Union, 2018b).

This is the main reason why the EU values WPS highly: it extends the traditional sphere of gender, peace and conflict, which is why the WPS agenda is a central aspect of all the EU's common foreign and security policy (Council of the European Union, 2018b). The *EU's Action Plan on WPS (2019-2024)* highlights three overarching and cross-cutting principles: participation, gender mainstreaming and leading by example, which will be further analysed below. Three other key priorities are prevention, protection, relief and recovery. All of these are mutually reinforcing (EEAS, 2019).

The first key principle of *participation* aims: (1) to increase women's leadership and participation in all areas related to peace and security within the EU services and institutions and in the EU Member States (Internal participation); (2) to help increase women's leadership and participation worldwide in all policy-making decisions/processes in all areas related to peace and security inter alia Conflict-Prevention, Conflict-Resolution, Mediation, Post-Conflict Rehabilitation, Rule of Law, Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR), Security Sector Reform (SSR) and Peace-Building in both formal and informal decision-making and priority setting. (External participation). (EEAS, 2019: 5). The Council stresses the importance of including women in peacebuilding highly, and:

Reiterates its call for strengthening the full, equal and meaningful participation and leadership of women and girls in conflict prevention and resolution throughout the conflict cycle, including in formal and informal mediation, crisis management, peacebuilding and peacekeeping, peace negotiations, demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration, security sector reform and other recovery and reconstruction processes.... A substantial increase in women's leadership and participation in all aspects of peace and security is necessary not only for the sake of human rights and gender equality, inclusive governance and social cohesion, but also for the sustainable resolution of conflicts and crises. (Council of the European Union, 2022)

The second principle, *Gender mainstreaming*, means to “systematically mainstream a gender perspective as an integral part in all EU policies as well as in internal and external actions and that such a gender perspective, based on gender analysis, is integrated into the implementation of all objectives of this Action Plan” (EEAS, 2019: 5). In academic debates, the main binary of

approaches to gender mainstreaming are the integrationist and transformative approach. The integrationist approach uses gender mainstreaming to reach certain policy goals, in which gender mainstreaming is more of a “box-ticking exercise” of policies to meet gender quota (Allwood, 2013; Zeynalli, 2021). On the contrary, the transformative approach to gender mainstreaming originated from feminist gender theories, and urges to understand the masculine nature of global norms and values, before trying to change the nature of the institutions itself (Mazey, 2000). In more recent EU gender-related documents, gender mainstreaming is a very commonly used principle. “Gender mainstreaming remains the primary means to achieve gender equality” (EC and HR, 2020). GAP III (2021-2025) goes on, and states that:

The European Commission and the High Representative reconfirm that by 2025 85% of all new external actions will have gender equality and women’s and girls’ empowerment as a significant objective or as a principal objective by 2025. This requires further gender mainstreaming in all external policies and sectors and a gender-transformative, rights-based and intersectional approach. (EC and HR, 2020: 3)

GAP III follows three core principles which should guide EU action, which are a gender-transformative approach, understanding the intersectionality of gender with other forms of discrimination, and an approach based on human rights. Furthermore, in all external EU-funded programmes the minimum standards are based on gender analyses to inform decision-making, the application of gender-sensitive and sex-disaggregated indicators for monitoring and to judge all action that does not contribute to gender equality.

The question if the EU utilises gender mainstreaming in an integrationist way or a transformative way remains. GAP III shows the use of gender language: Gender mainstreaming, gender equality, gender analyses, gender-sensitive and sex-disaggregated indicators, gender-transformative, rights-based and intersectional approach. Furthermore, women’s and girl’s empowerment are often used as a substitute for gender equality in the field of peace and security studies. *MIP of Ethiopia (2024-2027)* (2024) follows the same objectives for Ethiopia and sees gender-sensitive and gender-transformative programming as a cross-cutting priority. The three-pronged approach followed in Ethiopia focuses on making gender equality more effective, stepping up the implementation of the GAP III, and tackling the root causes of gender inequality and gender-based violence (GBV). Especially the latter shows the EU’s engagement with Ethiopia, since it wants to focus on “cultural change, ensuring government institutions move

from policy to implementation, and increasing awareness through community driven action” (EC, 2024e).

Leading by Example, which is the third key principle, means to enhance further EU's political commitments and actions for the implementation of the WPS Agenda at local, national, regional and international levels. (EEAS, 2019: 5). In GAP III, leading by example, is established through “gender-responsive and gender-balanced leadership at top EU political and management levels”, which requires “leadership buy-in, investing in knowledge, resources and pooling action with EU Member States” (EC and HR, 2020).

“The EU will strive to include and enable the participation of more women as mediators, chief negotiators and political representatives, including within its own structures” (BRON). This way, the EU wants to lead the way in showing how the inclusion of women in peacebuilding is a positive and necessary fact. The Council is “guaranteeing women’s meaningful and equitable participation in peace and decision-making processes in the context of all EU external instruments, as well as in EU common security and defence policy missions and operations, while avoiding gender-stereotypical expectations of male and female roles” (Council of the European Union, 2018b). The latter underlines the dangerous pitfall of gender stereotypes in the case of peacebuilding (which have been discussed under 4.3.3. Intersectionality in EU discourse).

4.5.2. Women, development and the SDGs

One way the EU empowers women as peacebuilders is linking it to development purposes. A gender perspective is systematically integrated into all EU policies. In the *EU’s Strategic Approach to WPS* (2018) it is said that “this will help achieve the goals of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development and the sustainable development goals (SDGs), including SDG 5 on gender equality and SDG 16 on peaceful and inclusive societies” (Council of the European Union, 2018b).⁸ While the former is clearly in line with empowering women and girls as peacebuilders, the latter goes beyond, and tackles all issues related to peace, justice and strong institutions. Furthermore, in the European Consensus on Development, “the EU and its Member

⁸ SDG 5 aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls and SDG 16 focuses on the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels (UN General Assembly, 2015).

States recognise women and girls as key agents of development and change, including their roles in peacebuilding, conflict resolution and humanitarian response” (Council of the European Union, 2018b). Just like SDG 16, this phrase shows the EU’s way of empowering women to reach certain development aims.

While this is not necessarily a bad thing, this could lead to an instrumental way of empowering women (*using* women), rather than a transformative way. Nevertheless, the document continues and urges the EU and its member states to prevent and respond to SGBV in (post-)conflict situations, and to support women as “positive agents for conflict prevention, conflict resolution, relief and recovery and building sustainable peace” (Council of the European Union, 2018b), which puts the emphasis back on peace and conflict. The CLIP of Ethiopia states that:

Ethiopia faces a multitude of challenges to reach the Sustainable Development Goal 5 ‘Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls’. In a patriarchal society, women and girls are strongly disadvantaged compared to men and boys. Gender imbalances intersect heavily with other forms of discrimination such as living in rural and conflict areas, poverty, HIV/AIDS, disability and old age. (EC, 2023)

This links back to the women’s barriers to inclusion which are discussed in chapter 3 (3.4). Gender inequality in Ethiopia is stooled on a patriarchal society and intersect with other forms of discrimination. Nevertheless, GAPIII points out that this deep-rooted inequality is not only the case in Ethiopia, but that there is “not a single country in the world that is close to achieving by 2030 gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls” (EC and HR, 2020):

In 2020, it is 25 years since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and 20 years since UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security were adopted. Some progress has been achieved, but deep-rooted inequalities persist, including on basic access to health, education and jobs, but also with regards to widespread gender-based violence everywhere in the world. (EC and HR, 2020)

Now again five years later, in 2025, it is 30 years since the Bejing Declaration, and 25 years since the implementation of UNSCR 1325 on WPS. The same inequalities exist, and there is still much to be done to visibly see differences regarding women’s participation in peace and security issues.

4.6. Conclusion

The EU's normative role as a gender promotor is clear in this discourse analysis, based on FCDA (Lazar, 2005). Overall, the discourses of the different EU institutions align. The second sub question of this research was: *how does the EU frame women's roles in peacebuilding in Ethiopia?* During the Tigray War, the EP frames women as victims of SGBV. While women on a global scale are often pushed into this victimhood narrative, the pre- and post-war reality show that the different EU institutions are self-reflexive and aware of the main feminist peacebuilding critiques recognising the different roles women play in peace and conflict issues. The EU calls this “applying a holistic perspective” and opts for a differentiated approach in which women are not only perceived as victims or natural peacemakers, but also as combatants, perpetrators, mediators, and above all *agents of change*. The EU highlights the transformative value of women's voices and lived experiences in the sources and claims to maintain an intersectional lens, which is often linked to a root-cause sensitive approach. Addressing structural inequalities, challenging gender norms linked to masculinity and femininity and making men also drivers of change help against essentialising perceptions of women. The EU stresses the importance of women in leadership positions, and women's CSOs, since they often play important roles at community levels.

The second sub question: *How is “empowerment” defined in EU-supported programs? Does it reflect a transformative or instrumental approach, and how does this approach reflect feminist peacebuilding principles?* Will be further discussed in chapter 6, discussion.

5. EU initiatives in practice

While the European Union has presented itself as a global leader in promoting the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda (chapter 4), the effectiveness of its commitments can only be examined through its practical initiatives. Is the EU able to implement what it preaches in numerous policy documents and policy declarations? Through an overview of the EU's engagement in different projects and funding instruments, this chapter 5 assesses whether the EU truly empowers women as peacebuilders during the Tigray War (2020-2022) and after the war, in the post-war reconstruction era (2022-2025). While EU engagement is complex and diverse, this chapter gives an overview of some illustrative cases rather than an exhaustive list of projects.

5.1. From humanitarian aid to development cooperation

During the Tigray War, the EU mostly showed its support through humanitarian aid. As seen in chapter 4, Caruso & Akamo (2024) criticize the EU for not having a deep contextual understanding of the conflict, which led to the inability to react in a prompt and timely manner to the war. The EU suspended 88 million euros to Ethiopia during the Tigray War, because of the humanitarian blockade the Ethiopian government had installed. “we are asking for a cease of hostilities, unhindered humanitarian access and an investigation of reported human rights abuses”, said European Commissioner for International Partnerships Jutta Urpilainen in a speech (EC, 2021b). Nevertheless, the EU stated that it kept on supporting the people in Tigray through humanitarian assistance (EC, 2021c). During the active phase of the Tigray War, EU's support was mostly channelled through humanitarian aid of the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) in the format of Humanitarian Implementation Plans (HIPs) (EC, 2020b, 2021a, 2022b). Given the scale of SGBV in the Tigray war, the victim/protection narrative dominated the war, and the focus was on providing necessities, such as food, water, shelter, education and protection services for the population in Tigray. The priority of the EU during the war was on “actions aimed at monitoring protection violations and/or addressing life-threatening protection risks, such as (but not limited to) child recruitment and Sexual and Gender Based Violence” (EC, 2020b: 27). Specific EU

support to women as peacebuilders was scarce. Given the enormous needs for humanitarian assistance, empowering women to be more than just victims was not the main EU priority at that moment.

In the aftermath of the Tigray War, the EU shifted its focus from humanitarian aid to development cooperation which had been pushed aside during the war. Since the end of the Tigray War in November 2022, the EU has reinitiated many projects with Ethiopia. Through the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI-Global Europe) (Council of the European Union, 2021b), the EU introduced new programmes which emphasised political participation of women and CSOs, transitional justice, social cohesion and reconciliation and reconstruction in the post-war era. Because of the political instability caused by the Tigray War, the EU could not conclude any long-term agreements with the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE). The EU's Multiannual Indicative Programme (MIP) with the FDRE did not commence in 2021, but was delayed until 2024 to start (EC, 2024e).

5.1.1. Individual Measures and MIP

As a replacement of the MIP, the EU commenced with a first set of *Individual Measures* in July 2022, a set of foreign interventions aimed at supporting the Tigrayan and Ethiopian populations affected by the war. This first set was focused on providing healthcare and education for children. After the CoHA in November 2022, the country “took the road to peace and reconciliation” (EC, 2024c: 5) and launched a second set of individual measures. These projects were focused on countering the food crisis in Ethiopia and providing peace and reconciliation in the country.

The individual measure *Promoting Inclusive and Gender Sensitive Reconciliation and Peace Building in Ethiopia* (EUR 20 000 000, 11 November 2022, 36 months) focuses on promoting sustainable peace and social cohesion in Ethiopia, by following a gender-sensitive approach (EC, 2022a). Through the promotion of inclusive and gender-sensitive discourse and the social fabric at many levels, this action aims to promote lasting peace and social cohesion in Ethiopia. One of the primary goals is to support the rehabilitation, reintegration, inclusion, and resilience-building of survivors of the conflict. The priority focus is on the participation of women and girls in vulnerable and marginalised groups, IDPs, minority groups and People with Disabilities (PWD). It employs a two-pronged strategy, supporting the resolution of local tension and social cohesion on the one hand, and on the other hand assisting those affected by conflict

in their efforts to recover and rebuild their. In this way, the aims of this project are fully in line with SDGs 16 and 5. It contributes to efforts on peace negotiations and looks for overlap with other Individual Measures and programmes. Additionally, the intervention will target communities and former combatants by offering comprehensive services on MPHS and SGBV and enhancing the capacity of women's CSOs to promote peace in areas affected by violence (EC, 2022a, 2023).

In a continuously complex and fragile context, it was only in April 2023 that the Council of the EU decided to normalise relations and restore the partnership with the Ethiopian government. This led to the establishment of the multiannual indicative programme (MIP) 2024-2027 between the EU and the FDRE. The main goal of the MIP is “to mobilise adequate resources for Ethiopia’s stability, post-conflict reconstruction and macro-economic recovery” (EC, 2024c: 5). Its objectives are to stabilise the northern regions of Ethiopia in the post-Tigray war era, to foster economic development and link it to the EU’s Global Gateway strategy. The MIP’s three priorities are the Green Deal, human development and governance and peacebuilding. It is exactly the latter which is relevant in this research. Within gender and peacebuilding, one of the goals is to promote gender equality. By implementing the WPS agenda, the MIP states that “specific attention will be given to women’s and girls’ rights organisations, peacebuilding organisations, feminist organisations, and women human rights defenders” (EC, 2024c: 17). 12 percent of the EU support to Ethiopia is allocated to *governance and peacebuilding*, which is about 62 million euro in the period 2024-2027 (EC, 2024d). The policy area governance and peacebuilding is only the third priority of the EU in Ethiopia. Given the political sensitivities the EU now tends to focus its efforts primarily on economic development and on the Global Gateway that should promote win-wins for both Ethiopia and the EU. Governance and peacebuilding are only a third priority of the EU in Ethiopia.

In April 2024, the first action documents were published under this MIP. One of the actions is *Strengthening democratic institutions, transitional justice, gender equality and social cohesion in Ethiopia* (EUR 57 000 000, 15 April 2024, 60 months), which is part of priority area 3 of governance and peacebuilding, and was a joint effort of the EU Delegation in Addis Ababa and the European Union Military Staff (EUMS). The action document states that in this post-war period, there is a lack of political will, institutional and human capacity to profoundly manage political reforms, and to “build a democratic, stable and prosperous country for all Ethiopians irrespective of their ethnicity, religion and gender” (EC, 2024a: 3). The main goal of this project is thus to strengthen inclusive, strong and resilient local institutions and civil

society, to end up with sustainable peace recovery and development. Additionally, there is a focus on women and girls' organisations and CSOs to participate in this process, since one of the main objectives is to: "Improve capacities of Ethiopian institutions at all levels to advance Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) in line with international and national normative frameworks and commitments" (EC, 2024a: 4).

5.1.2. EU-funded actions focused on structural reforms

Nevertheless, this MIP Action plan does not have a specific focus on empowering women as peacebuilders. Especially after the Pretoria Agreement, there are many other EU-funded projects that entail a gender perspective which address structural inequalities and specific needs of women. Understanding these root causes and providing reforms indirectly adds to supporting women and creates entry points for further participation and more equal representation in the peacebuilding sector.

An important project the EU has funded is *Determining Ethiopian Women's Status and Priorities: an Action Research Project* (EUR 1 000 000, January 2023 - October 2024), which was funded by the NDICI Human Rights Country Allocation (EEAS, 2025d; Hailu et al., 2024). The aim of this initiative, which is implemented by Oxfam International and the Network of Ethiopian Women's Associations (NEWA), is to support women's empowerment and gender equality, especially in Ethiopian conflict affected regions. It is a profound quantitative and qualitative study regarding the needs and priorities of Ethiopian women in different regions of the country, and highlights the needs and experiences of women, especially at community level. It maps levels of education and literacy, feelings of (in)security, and bridges the knowledge gap about women's ambitions related to governance, peacebuilding, community and CSOs. This project amplifies women's voices through mixed methods research across 36,000 homes nationally, including crisis locations, offering data that can guide policy-and decision-making and gender-responsive peacebuilding (EC, 2023; EEAS, 2025d; Hailu et al., 2024).

About women's participation in the political landscape, *Enhancing the Participation of Women in Ethiopian Politics: Balancing the Scales* (EUR 2 800 000, 1 January 2023 – 1 December 2025) is a gender-transformative, EU-funded project led by Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD) and Coalition of Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations for Elections (CECOE) which promotes women's participation in political functions in Ethiopia, by specifically working together with political parties to encourage to include more women

(EC, 2023; EEAS, 2025a). While this project is not immediately focused on supporting women as peacebuilders, it addresses a more structural issue related to it, namely the restricted access of women to political spheres.

Concerning civil society support and grassroots women's agency, the *Strengthening Local Civil Society for Inclusion and Dialogue (CSF +)* (EUR 4 046 471, of which EUR 3 439 500 is EU contribution, 1 February 2025 – 31 January 2029) is a EU-funded initiative which aims to strengthen 60 grassroots CSO across Ethiopia, specifically focused on women, youth and underrepresented groups (EEAS, 2025f). Another project is the EU's *Civil Society Fund III Programme* (EUR 16 000 000). While it is generally meant for all different kinds of CSOs in Ethiopia, it explicitly focuses on women and girls' empowerment, securing democratic institutions, gender equality and democratic governance.

Regarding socio-economic stability and reconciliation, the *Stability and socio-economic development for vulnerable and marginalised communities in the Tigray region* (EUR 6 000 000, 28 May 2019, 42 months) is an ongoing project in Tigray, which started before the war. The main goal of this programme is to “promote stability and reconciliation, socio-economic development and greater self-reliance, in the Tigray region of Ethiopia”. Furthermore, the promotion of gender mainstreaming and community-level peacebuilding and conflict prevention at local levels, diversify livelihood opportunities, and foster social cohesion in Tigray is also on the list of objectives (Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, n.d.).

Other examples of structural reform projects are:

- *Support to sustainable and integrated responses to forced displacement and labour migration in Ethiopia* (EUR 36 000 000, NDICI-funded, priority area 2: human development): promoting context-specific, durable solutions for forced displacement (IDPs, refugees); with a focus on GBV and women's empowerment (EC, 2024c)
- *Post-Conflict Restoration of Basic Health Services, Medical and Psycho-Social Support to Gender-Based Violence Survivors and Conflict Affected Communities in Ethiopia* (EUR 25 000 000, NDICI-funded, priority area 2: human development): focus on SGBV, medical treatment, skilled personnel and specialised equipment (EC, 2024a)
- *Addressing Social Determinants of Health for Gender equality* (EUR 24 950 000): nutrition, family planning, prevention of SGBV and FGM, linked to GAP III (EC, 2023)
- *Strengthening Justice Sector Reform for Rights and Inclusion* (EUR 15 000 000, 30 January 2025): reforming of Ethiopia's justice institutions, especially for women, children and vulnerable groups (EEAS, 2025c)

- *Supporting Displaced Communities through Inclusive and Sustainable Solutions* (EUR 43 580 000 of which EUR 40 000 000 EU contribution, 1 January 2024 – 31 December 2026): addresses the needs of Ethiopia’s 4,4 million displaced people; providing of basic services, fostering social cohesion, and protecting vulnerable groups, especially women and children, in the face of conflict and climate-related crises. One of the goals is to “Train over 1,000 Community leaders and influencers (CSOs, local government staff, individuals, etc.) on the reduction of stigma related to sexualized and gender-based violence (SGBV), community dialogue and promotion of nonviolence” (EEAS, 2025e)
- *CARE4Health* (EUR 31 500 000, 1 November 2022 – 30 June 2026): aims to strengthen health facilities in Ethiopia, especially in the northern regions (EEAS, 2025b)

Although the EU funds considerably more projects in Ethiopia which target in one way or another women, it would be too long of a list to mention all of these. As the war recedes, the focus of the EU has also shifted, while the EU is now focusing more on supporting businesses, digital transformation and the Green Deal.

5.2. Conclusion

This illustrative overview of the EU’s initiatives in practice show that while the EU mostly acted as a humanitarian actor during the war, it changed its focus to development cooperation in the post-war recovery period. Most of the EU’s initiatives are based on structural reforms which indirectly empower women, but only the Indicative Measure *Promoting Inclusive and Gender Sensitive Reconciliation and Peace Building in Ethiopia* is directly aimed at supporting women as peacebuilders.

6. Discussion: Discourse versus Practice

Discourse has the power to shape our understandings of reality, social constructs and norms, and power dynamics within society. Nevertheless, discourse is nothing more than just a concept if it does not align with the promises – the practice – it entails. The central aim of this thesis was to examine the role of the EU in promoting women as peacebuilders, and the effectiveness of its commitments during and after the Tigray War (2020-2022) in Ethiopia. By assessing the EU's discourse regarding women and peace, this research also questioned broader perspectives of the EU on gender equality, the inclusion of women in decision-making processes, the normative role of the EU as a global actor and its self-reflexivity. The previous chapters have examined this discourse (chapter 4) and practice (chapter 5). What follows in this chapter is a comprehensive discussion to assess whether discourse and practice align, diverge or remain ambiguous, guided by the main feminist peacebuilding principles.

6.1. Instrumental versus transformative power

During the Tigray War, women are mostly framed as victims of SGBV in need of protection (EP, 2022a). Most of the EU's initiatives in support of the Tigrayan population focused on humanitarian aid, which stressed the victimhood as well as EU's protection narrative. Without a doubt, urgent humanitarian support needed to be prioritised during a humanitarian crisis of unprecedented scale before empowerment of women could be addressed. While fully recognising that Tigrayan women did suffer major gender-based violence in the war, a mere focus on victimhood tend to reinforce “masculine visions” of war which does not help women recognise their agency as valuable peacebuilders.

In the post-war period, this alignment of discourse and practice changes. Only one major initiative, the 20 million euro Indicative Measure project *Promoting Inclusive and Gender Sensitive Reconciliation and Peace Building in Ethiopia* (EC, 2022a) was explicitly dedicated to address women's participation in peace processes. While the EU discourses of general gender frameworks and post-war published documents often highlight women as agents of change, most EU-funded initiatives focus more on structural reforms, development and governance. For instance, women's political empowerment, human development, education, addressing of

socio-economic situations, justice sector reforms and investments in healthcare facilities, guided by the principles of gender mainstreaming and gender equality are some domains in which the EU invests. These broader structural reform projects indirectly contribute to women's empowerment by addressing and actively eliminating structural inequality but were not primarily designed to strengthen women as peacebuilders. The absence of specific actions aiming to empower women as key players in peace processes seems to be in contradiction with the EU's discourse that explicitly spells out ambitious commitments in this field. This suggests that gender equality is not only a normative value that the EU holds dear, but also a strategic tool to obtain sustainable peace. This has the risk to depoliticize women's *empowerment*. From a feminist peacebuilding perspective, this reflects a tension between transformative empowerment – in which women's agency is centralised – and instrumental empowerment – in which women are “utilised” to reach broader development and stability goals. These references remain largely abstract and rhetorical without specifying how intersectional differences – such as class, ethnicity or displacement status – should be addressed in practice. Lazar (2005) emphasizes exactly this depoliticization of feminist concepts becoming buzzwords, claiming progressiveness in discourse, while leaving the underlying power hierarchies unchallenged.

This leads to a recurring topic in this research. *How is empowerment defined in EU-supported programs? Does it reflect a transformative or instrumental approach, and how does this approach reflect feminist peacebuilding principles?*

This tension between a transformative and instrumental approach of the EU is very context dependent. In the case of the Tigray War, Caruso & Akamo (2024: 131-32) explicitly state that “the EU's lack of meaningful contextual knowledge and the unresolved tension between pragmatic and normative approaches to the crisis, prevented it from developing a proper mitigation strategy for the conflict”. They criticize the EU for not having done enough research to profoundly understand the background of the war, which led to an unpreparedness on the EU's side when tensions in Tigray escalated. The EU has fallen into the trap of its normative approach by unsuccessfully using its normative power to pressure the Ethiopian government into stopping the humanitarian blockade and only took pragmatic measures (humanitarian aid) to counter this failure when it was already “too late”. Similarly, several feminist peacebuilding authors, such as Shepherd (2017) stress the importance of addressing structural inequalities and gendered power hierarchies. To tackle these structural inequalities, an intersectional lens is needed. In its discourse, the EU does distinguish women in social categories of “the most

disadvantaged” women, such as indigenous peoples, persons belonging to racial/ethnic/religious minorities, IDPs and elderly women (EC and HR, 2020). Maes & Debusscher (2022: 16-7) state that intersectionality in GAP III’s discourse is “not yet transformative in the strict sense” due to the policy’s failure to acknowledge the connections between individual disparities and larger power structures and systems. Although it occurs slightly more in its discourse, the EU’s language stays general and does not always make intersectional distinctions (such as ethnicity class, sexuality) when speaking about women. Nevertheless, in EU-funded projects such as *Determining Ethiopian Women’s Status and Priorities: an Action Research Project* (Hailu et al., 2024) do leave room for more intersectional understandings of women’s experiences in Ethiopia.

Although the EU does underline the importance of understanding the root causes of conflicts in its discourse, it does not go as far as to challenge the existing, masculine security paradigms, or the gendered conceptualisation of war and peace which are prerequisites for feminist peacebuilding theorists (Cockburn, 2001, 2007; Enloe, 2014; O’Reilly et al., 2015; Shepherd, 2017). Peacebuilding is not neutral, since it is based on societal structures, inequalities, and gendered perceptions of war and peace. Instead of just adding a gender perspective, authors such as Mama (1995, 2005) and Batliwala (2013) stress how neoliberal economic frameworks, militarised governance and international interventions often strengthen power inequalities that hinder sustainable peace.

6.2. Normative Power Europe and the WPS agenda

Many feminist scholars have criticised the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda for its normative, liberal, state-centred, gender unaware and essentialist stances (Chapter 1; Aggestam & Bergman Rosamond, 2021; Cockburn, 2007; Cohn, 2008; George & Shepherd, 2016; Shepherd, 2017; Singh, 2017). Although UNSCR 1325 has brought women as agents instead of victims into the peace and security discourse (Cohn et al., 2004), 25 years later the WPS agenda has only led to limited change. Nevertheless, the EU positions itself as a global gender actor by using the WPS agenda as a guiding framework in all peace and security related topics and projects. The EU values the main principles of the WPS agenda – participation, gender mainstreaming and leading by example – dearly, and utilises it to frame concepts such as empowerment, agency, women’s participation, protection and intersectionality in its discourse.

Mirroring the EU's initiatives, the long-standing feminist critique of the WPS agenda turns into reality. There is a double standard in the EU's policy of complying with the WPS agenda, while still reinforcing traditional security perspectives through global arms trade, and the global military industrial complex which eventually hinders prospects for sustainable peace (Bache, 2019). The EU's discourse proves to be rhetorically empowering, but fails to align its practice, which is also something Manners (2002) warns for when introducing the concept of Normative Power Europe. By only including one main project directly aimed at supporting women as peacebuilders in Tigray and on top of that linking women to development purposes, women's participation as peacebuilders is reduced into a "ticking-the-box" exercise, in which the quota of inclusion of women is more important than their actual empowerment. The EU's reliance on the WPS agenda to strengthen its normative character has a downside to it: the EU tends to undermine its own credibility.

This can be linked to the EU's use of gender language in its discourse. As seen in chapter 4, the EU interweaves gender-related concepts, especially in the main gender frameworks such as GAP III. Concepts such as gender mainstreaming, gender equality, gender transformative, gender responsive are commonplace. Nevertheless, the inclusion of gender-related concepts does not actually mean that there is gender awareness, as Shepherd (2017) shows in her critique on the lack of a gender construct in the WPS discourse. In the WPS discourse, there is a misuse of concepts such as *gender equality* and *gender mainstreaming* which are mostly included for integrationist rather than transformative reasons. Additionally, overly conflating gender with women could ironically lead to a disempowerment of women in society, and the exclusion of queer individuals in society (Shepherd, 2017). Razavi & Miller (1995) stress that confusing *gender* with *women* diminishes women's agency and subjugates them to men. The EU's discourse is definitely susceptible to co-optation, where gender-related concepts are used to mainstream feminist peacebuilding agendas (Cockburn, 2007; Cohn, 2008; True, 2012). Specifically in global governance, True (2012) states that often empowerment is invoked as a powerful discourse but used in a way which serves institutions more than it transforms gendered power relations.

6.3. Institutional perspectives versus local agency

The EU repeatedly highlights the importance of grassroots organisations and community-led initiatives in peacebuilding practices. Its discourse highlights the importance of local ownership, the strengthening of grassroots women's CSOs. Additionally, the power of women in community peace processes at local level is underlined and should be linked to peace processes on a more national scale. The importance of local, regional and national ownership is stressed in the EU's discourse. Additionally, the discourse is aware of the necessity to include CSOs, women's rights organisations and groups throughout the whole policy cycle, instead of just a tick-the-box inclusion. This aligns with the transformative-integrationist nexus, discussed in relation to gender concepts such as gender mainstreaming. *Strengthening Local Civil Society for Inclusion and Dialogue* (EEAS, 2025f) and the EU's *Civil Society Fund III Programme* (EEAS, 2024) are two of the initiatives that focus on strengthening civil society, specifically women's groups in Tigray, as well as in other parts of Ethiopia.

Nevertheless, women's organizations receive less direct support from the EU, while much of the EU funding is allocated on institutional or state-level. This leads back to the very core of feminist peacebuilding, which critiques liberal peacebuilding for its top-down, institutional masculinized approach. The EU runs the risk of marginalizing the very women it promises to empower by giving preference to large institutional partners. Last, restrictions, intimidation and arrests of civil society leaders by the Ethiopian government leads to a shrinking civic space in the country, which further hinders the EU's ambitions to work together with CSOs and grassroots organisations.

6.4. Limitations and future research

There are some clear limitations in this research. First, given the recency of the Tigray War academic literature assessing the role of the EU during the war remains limited, especially related to women as peacebuilders. This leads to a second limitation: the limited amount of EU sources addressing women, peacebuilding and the Tigray War. This led me to – in addition to using these existing sources – fall back onto an analysis of broader Ethiopia-related sources, or more general gender frameworks of the EU related to women, peace and security. Third, while a feminist peacebuilding perspective underlines the importance of grassroots organisations,

women's lived experiences and voices, this research is primarily based on EU sources which originated from a top-down perspective. I was limited to accessible online sources, which are primarily detail broad policies or large funding allocations without specifying the names of recipient CSOs or women-led organisations. Conducting interviews with women's peacebuilding organisations on the ground in Tigray could provide a more grounded assessment of the EU's engagements with women's grassroots organisations, challenging the institutional discourse of this research. However, this fell outside of the scope of this master's thesis and would have been difficult to implement since the situation in Tigray remains tense.

Future research could explore on comparative studies of the EU's support to women as peacebuilders in other countries, examine how "daily peacebuilding" looks like and how international actors like the EU can recalibrate their engagement towards more transformative approaches to peacebuilding.

A conclusion: towards a sustainable peace?

The participation of women in peacebuilding processes is of paramount importance for obtaining long-term sustainable peace (Aggestam & Eitrem Holmgren, 2022; Muñoz Bernad, 2024; O'Reilly et al., 2015; Paffenholz et al., 2015; Väyrynen et al., 2021). On a global scale however, women tend to be systematically underrepresented or even excluded in mediation and processes towards the resolution of conflicts, which is due to several existing barriers in society. This thesis examined the role of the European Union in promoting the participation of women as peacebuilders during and after the Tigray War (2020-2022). Additionally, it assessed whether the EU's initiatives in empowering women as peacebuilders have been effective or not. By applying both Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (Lazar, 2005) to analyse the selected EU sources, this thesis ultimately assessed how the EU's practice aligns with its discourse in supporting women as peacebuilders during and after the Tigray War.

How does the EU frame women's roles in peacebuilding in Ethiopia? (sub-question 1)

This research found that overall, the different institutions of the EU recognise the different roles women play in conflict situations, both on a global scale and in the Tigray War. By naming the different roles women play during conflict, such as mediators, peacebuilders, agents of change but also combatants and perpetrators, the EU shows that its discourse aligns with feminist peacebuilding concepts such as intersectionality, root-cause sensitivity and addressing of structural inequalities. The EU mentions the necessity to challenge dominant gender norms and notions such as femininity and masculinity and makes men co-responsible empowering women and challenging dominant structures. Last, it underlines the importance of working together with women-led civil society organisations.

How is "empowerment" defined in EU-supported programs? Does it reflect a transformative or instrumental approach, and how does this approach reflect feminist peacebuilding principles? (sub-question 2)

Although the EU's is discursively strong, an assessment of the EU's practices shows that the alignment or divergence of the EU's discourse and practice is not unambiguous. The statement of Caruso & Akamo (2024), that the EU lacked contextual knowledge in the Tigray War, which

has led to a clash between the EU's normative agenda and pragmatic ambitions tend to be confirmed in this research. Although the EU presents itself as a global promoter of gender equality, it undermines its own position by relying too much on global frameworks such as the UN's Women, Peace and Security agenda, which tend to favour rather institutional and top-down perceptions of gender, peace and war and do not leave enough room for local realities, voices and ownership of women.

During the Tigray war, the EU's support is mostly visible in the form of humanitarian aid. After the war, there is a strong emphasis on indirect empowerment through the emergence of projects which mainly prioritise needed and useful structural reforms. However, apart from one single EU project, limited space has been created for the initiatives that specifically aim to empower women in peacebuilding initiatives. This shows that the EU has other priorities. To demonstrate its normative power, the EU links women to global development goals such as the SDGs. This is exactly what feminist peacebuilders warn for: linking concepts such as empowerment to development purposes might depoliticize the meaning of empowerment which minimalizes it into a hollow buzzword. Additionally, reading between the lines of EU documents: concepts such as intersectionality and gender mainstreaming are often framed in integrationist rather than transformative ways, in the sense that they are used for performative "ticking-the-box" purposes only.

Because of its lack of contextual knowledge of the Tigray War (Caruso & Akamo, 2024), its instrumental way of framing intersectionality (without addressing differences such as class, ethnicity and displacement status) and its inability to link this to structural power inequalities, shows that the EU does not frame empowerment in a transformative way according to feminist peacebuilding principles. It is exactly the latter that the EU should increasingly put into question to get a more holistic perspective on aligning its discourse with its practice, and a more meaningful framing of *empowerment*. Recognising this gap is important, as it tends to affect the EU's credibility as a global gender actor, including in supporting Ethiopian and Tigrayan women in peacebuilding. Rhetoric alone will not sustain the EU's normative identity; consistent action is also required to aim and work towards a transformative, feminist way of peacebuilding.

How can the EU improve its initiatives in empowering Ethiopian women as peacebuilders?
(sub-question 3)

In terms of how the EU could improve its concrete actions, this research suggests several paths forward. The EU should embrace a transformative approach to peacebuilding, inspired by feminist peacebuilding theorists. It should concentrate its efforts primarily on tackling structural inequalities and listen to women's voices and lived experiences beyond the purely institutional ways of peacebuilding. It should reevaluate its current perceptions of war and gender and give more space to include different perceptions of the meaning of peacebuilding while also challenging the existing male security paradigms. Although on paper the EU proves to be a global gender actor and supporter of women as peacebuilders, it could still enhance its credibility in the real world by aligning its practice with its discourse.

Beyond the Tigray case, the results highlight the necessity for foreign players to rethink peacebuilding as a process that is directed and shaped by the people who are most impacted (in this case, Tigrayan women). To achieve lasting and inclusive peace, peacebuilding efforts must address structural disparities, embrace transformative rather than instrumental empowerment, and anchor foreign support in local agency. In a context of shrinking space for civil society organisations, including women's organisation, in Ethiopia and several other African countries it remains a challenge for the international community and in particular the EU to find creative ways to provide effective support to these non-governmental organisations that could be playing an essential role in long-term peace processes.

In conclusion, this research shows that the EU to some extent has played a supportive role regarding empowering women as peacebuilders in response to the Tigray War. Nevertheless, there are some pitfalls, and areas for improvement. The EU's approach remains partly constrained by its own normative agendas. By praising and subscribing to the UN's WPS agenda, the feminist critiques on WPS indirectly also tend to be directed towards the EU's discourse and vision on women in peacebuilding. While the EU's discourse overall promotes the empowerment of women, this research has made some critical observations that EU actions in the field do not always align with the feminist principles of transformative empowerment and sustainable peace.

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