

# THE NEW PRESIDENCY TRIO

## AN OPPORTUNITY FOR **GENDER** **EQUALITY AND SRHR**



Over the last years, the EU has been facing many challenges in the realization of its core values: the rule of law, democracy, human rights, equality, gender equality and women's rights. The upcoming years are an opportunity for the EU to reflect on the direction it wants to take, the values it should stand for, and what more it can do to uphold and defend them. The EU should strive towards a world where everyone can enjoy the same rights, and lead free and safe private and family lives, free from sexism, coercion, and violence.

In this crossroads moment, the Council of the EU Presidency Trio – France, Czech Republic and Sweden – has a critical role to play to uphold EU values. We call on this Trio to adopt a feminist approach and show stronger leadership to further advance gender equality and women's rights, including sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), in the EU and beyond.

## **SRHR UNDER THREAT: THE URGENCY TO ACT**

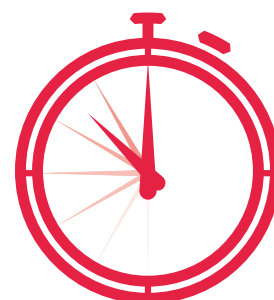
As demonstrated by EIGE's 2021 Gender Equality Index<sup>1</sup>, no EU Member States has fully achieved gender equality, in any field: whether in economics, politics, education, health, or the fight against gender-based violence.

SRHR, which are a key precondition for the realization of gender equality, are far from being realized in the EU and the world. Due to a wide range of legal, policy, practical, economic, social and cultural barriers, access to SRHR varies widely within and between countries, including between EU Member States. Access is particularly limited for women and key population groups, and for specific healthcare services, such as abortion care<sup>2</sup>.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities and has particularly affected women and marginalized groups<sup>3</sup>. It has also further fragilized access to healthcare, including SRH services. The pandemic requires a recovery that will set Europe, and the world, on a transformation towards a more just and inclusive society, leaving no one behind.

Furthermore, rising authoritarianism, coercive and misogynistic movements in Europe and the world have been threatening

gender equality, women's rights, LGBTI+ rights and reproductive freedom, and the broader European values of human rights, liberal democracy and the rule of law<sup>4</sup>. To ensure the safety and wellbeing of its citizens, the EU must counter this backsliding within and beyond its borders, resist the regressive measures these illiberal groups seek to impose, and defend its values, including reproductive freedom.



# OUR RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE PRESIDENCY TRIO TO LEAD THE EU ON A FEMINIST PATH

## AT THE POLITICAL LEVEL:

## ADOPT A FEMINIST APPROACH TO EU POLICY-MAKING

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### STRONG POLITICAL LEADERSHIP FOR GENDER EQUALITY

We welcome the Trio's commitment to "promote gender equality" and "respect for sexual and reproductive health and rights"<sup>5</sup>. To achieve these objectives, the Trio should adopt a feminist approach to EU policies, both internal and external. This Trio is uniquely placed to do so: France and Sweden have both committed to implement a feminist foreign policy, and should therefore apply this approach at the EU level, and the Czech Republic should follow suit. The Presidency Trio should:

- Adopt a feminist approach to EU policy-making; show political will and strong leadership to make gender equality and SRHR a key priority in all EU policies, actions and funding instruments; mainstream these issues in all relevant Council work; and give them visibility, including through high-level events and political declarations.
- Affirm that SRHR are at the core of fundamental EU values, as human rights, and essential for gender equality.
- Take an intersectional approach to reduce intersecting inequalities and ensure the needs of all people, particularly the most underserved, are met; and take a gender-transformative approach to end unequal patriarchal power structures.

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### COUNTER OPPOSITION IN THE COUNCIL

Implementing a feminist diplomacy also means countering opposition to gender equality. The backlash on women's rights has strongly impacted the Council of the EU's work recently: EU Member States have been divided, with some countries actively preventing the adoption of Council Conclusions because of references to gender equality or SRHR (including on the Gender Equality Strategy, Gender Action Plan III, and the Istanbul Convention). This dangerous strategy carried out by a minority of Member States weakens the Council's cohesion and undermines the EU's capacity to advance gender equality. The Trio must:

- Ensure that gender equality and SRHR remain non-negotiable priorities for the EU and its Member States, and work with all Member States to build consensus and progress on these questions.
- Monitor and condemn at the highest political level any retrogressive initiatives taken in EU Member States, and in third countries.

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### WORK WITH AND SUPPORT CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

Civil society organisations (CSOs) working on gender equality and SRHR have a unique role to play in promoting these issues, because of their outreach to local communities and their advocacy at national level - which also puts them at the forefront of countering the backlash against SRHR. However, these CSOs, including local and grassroots organisations, often lack adequate resources and support to carry out their work, and are even under attack in some contexts. The Trio should:

- Support politically and financially, through EU internal and external funding instruments, but also protect, consult, and give visibility to civil society actors who defend gender equality and SRHR;
- Work with CSOs to actively counter the opposition to gender equality and SRHR.

# AT THE POLICY LEVEL: USE CONCRETE POLICIES TO STRENGTHEN GENDER EQUALITY AND SRHR

On top of a strong political leadership, the EU also needs ambitious policies in favour of gender equality and SRHR. Several EU policy areas are particularly relevant for the promotion of SRHR within the EU, including health, gender equality and non-discrimination, combating gender-based violence, fundamental rights, and the rule of law. The EU must also promote gender equality and SRHR outside of its borders, through its development, human rights, and neighbourhood policies, but also through its trade policy and climate crisis response. Finally, to ensure effective implementation, the Trio must ensure that adequate financial resources are allocated to gender equality and SRHR in both the EU's internal and external funding instruments, including in the COVID recovery phase.

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## WITHIN THE EU

### A) Fundamental rights, civic space and the rule of law

SRHR are human rights and should be defended as such as part of core EU values. The protection of SRHR is also dependent on respect for the rule of law. Recent developments in Poland have shown that SRHR are among the first rights to be undermined when the rule of law collapses<sup>6</sup>. CSOs and women human rights defenders protecting SRHR are increasingly under attack as well, facing threats, intimidation, and violence, from both state and non-state actors<sup>7</sup>. The Trio must:

- Defend EU values in EU Member States: ensure that fundamental rights, including SRHR, and the rule of law are respected, and that CSOs can work in an enabling environment;
- Politically condemn any negative development pertaining to EU values, such as the de facto abortion ban in Poland, through joint statements signed by EU Member States.
- Use all the tools at its disposal to ensure respect for EU values and apply sanctions whenever necessary, including:
  - Political tools: Rule of law mechanism and Article 7 TEU – address breaches of the rule of law, and related human rights violations, in country specific peer reviews and Article 7 Hearings, adopt Recommendations and vote to move toward sanctioning Poland;
  - Financial tools: encourage the Commission to trigger the conditionality of EU funds mechanism for Poland, and approve this decision in the Council.

### B) Health

With COVID, health is now at the forefront of the EU's recovery. The Trio should aim to reduce health inequalities, including gender inequalities; promote equal access to health care, including sexual and reproductive health care, in particular for vulnerable groups (e.g. Roma women, LGBTIQ people); address the specific health needs of certain populations (e.g. women need reproductive health care that men do not); and strengthen preventive measures, through health information and education, including comprehensive sexuality education. The Trio should:

- Include a gender perspective, and when relevant SRHR, throughout EU health policies, actions and funding, including in the implementation of the EU4Health Programme;
- Follow up on the 2006 and 2009 Council Conclusions on gender and health<sup>8</sup>, the findings of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) 2021 Index on Health, and the EU Strategies for Roma and LGBTI Equality; and adopt Council Conclusions on gender equality in health, including sexual and reproductive health.

### C) Gender equality and gender-based violence

The EU is committed to improve gender equality and tackle gender-based violence, and SRHR are an integral component to both<sup>9</sup>. We welcome the Trio's commitment to "make the Union's Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 a reality for all" and to "fight against gender-based stereotypes"<sup>10</sup>.

To progress towards **gender equality**, the Trio should:

- Adopt Council Conclusions to commit to the implementation of the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025;
- Contribute to a Mutual Learning Seminar, organised by the Commission (DG JUST Gender Equality Unit) to promote good practices on SRHR towards other Member States;

To tackle **gender-based violence**, the Trio should:

- Support the Directive on gender-based violence, to be proposed by the Commission in March 2022<sup>11</sup>: this Directive should contain measures to prevent violence, including through gender-transformative relationship and sexuality education, and ensure victims' access to essential services, including SRH services.
- Encourage all EU Member States to ratify the Istanbul Convention, and progress towards the EU accession to the Istanbul Convention through qualified majority;
- Adopt the Commission's proposal to include hate crimes and hate speech, including on grounds of sex, sexual orientation and gender identity, in the list of Eurocrimes.

## OUTSIDE THE EU

The last Presidency Trio marked key milestones: the Generation Equality Forum, the adoption of the NDICI Regulations and of the Gender Action Plan III all highlighted the need to prioritise gender equality and SRHR in EU external actions<sup>12</sup>. The Trio committed to “strive for the full implementation of the EU Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy and Gender Action Plan III”<sup>13</sup>. To effectively implement these policies, the Trio must:

- Monitor **the implementation of the NDICI and the funding allocations to gender equality and SRHR**:
  - Use all the tools available (joint programming, Team Europe Initiatives, dialogue with the European Commission) to promote the allocation of adequate funding to gender equality and SRHR;
  - Track the financial targets set in the **NDICI**<sup>14</sup>, and adopt Council Conclusions on the European Commission and Member States performance against those targets, including recommendations on the way forward to achieve them;
- Monitor **the implementation of the GAP III and keep all European actors** (EU Delegations, the European Commission, the European External Action Service as well as Member States) **accountable** for the achievement of the GAP III objectives:
  - Organise under the Swedish Presidency a public discussion with the European Commission, the European External Action Service and CSOs for the mid-term review of the GAP III to assess its implementation;
  - Based on this discussion, adopt Council Conclusions on the **GAP III** implementation to make recommendations and strengthen it in the coming years. The Council Conclusions should include a strong prioritisation of intersectionality, fighting against gender stereotypes and harmful gender norms and ensuring the access to and respect of SRHR, including access to SRH services and Comprehensive Sexuality Education;
- Monitor **the implementation of the EU Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy and keep all European actors accountable**:
  - Organise a public discussion with the European Commission, the European External Action Service and CSOs for the mid-term review of the EU Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy to assess its implementation at the end of 2022;
  - Based on this discussion, adopt Council Conclusions on the Action Plan implementation to strengthen it in the coming years, including through prioritising women’s rights, SRHR and support to Women Human Rights Defenders in the world;
- Prioritise **gender equality and SRHR in the African Union-EU Summit** in February 2022:
  - Organise political dialogues around gender equality and SRHR during the Summit;
  - Include strong, precise and ideally binding commitments to gender equality and SRHR in the outcome document of the Summit;
  - Guarantee the inclusion and effective participation of African and European CSOs working on gender equality and SRHR during the Summit;
- Follow up on the **Generation Equality Forum** to actually achieve commitments made by organising a high-level Generation Equality Forum follow-up conference on the accountability and implementation of the commitments made by EU Member States and the European Union under the GEF;
- Include a **gender-transformative approach in all EU external actions**, as this is what a true feminist diplomacy approach means: a gender lens must be included in EU external actions regarding humanitarian aid, development, human rights, neighbourhood, trade, security, migration, climate and economic policies.



## ENDNOTES

- 1 EIGE Gender Equality Index 2021 - <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2021>
- 2 IPPF EN - EPF Abortion Atlas, September 2021 - [https://www.ippfen.org/sites/ippfen/files/2021-10/ABORT%20Atlas\\_EN%202021-v12.pdf](https://www.ippfen.org/sites/ippfen/files/2021-10/ABORT%20Atlas_EN%202021-v12.pdf)
- 3 IPPF EN Briefing, How to address the impact of COVID-19 on women, girls and vulnerable groups and their sexual and reproductive safety, 2020  
<https://www.ippfen.org/resource/how-address-impact-covid-19-women-girls-and-vulnerable-groups-and-their-sexual-and>
- 4 European Parliament Resolution on the backlash against gender equality and women's rights in the EU, 13 February 2019 - [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2019-0111\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2019-0111_EN.html)
- 5 Council of the EU 18-months programme (1 January 2022 - 30 June 2023): <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14441-2021-INIT/en/pdf>
- 6 European Parliament Resolution on the de facto ban on the right to abortion in Poland, 26 November 2020 - [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0336\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0336_EN.html)
- 7 IPPF EN Defend the Defenders Campaign <https://defendthedefenders.eu/>  
IPPF EN – CIVICUS Op Ed, 14 October 2021 <https://euobserver.com/opinion/153216?s=03>
- 8 In the past, the Commission and Member States have committed to work towards reducing health inequalities, while integrating a gender dimension (2006 Council Conclusions ; 2010 Council Conclusions). In particular, the 2006 Council conclusions on “women’s health” recognised the importance of reducing health inequalities linked to gender within and between Member States; the need for gender sensitive prevention measures, health promotion and treatment; reliable and comparable data on women’s health; and gender mainstreaming in health policies.
- 9 IPPF EN Countdown 2030E Factsheet on SRHR and SGBV, March 2021 - [https://www.countdown2030europe.org/storage/app/media/uploaded-files/FACTSHEETS\\_%20IPPF\\_gender%20based%20violence\\_02-Acrobat4.pdf](https://www.countdown2030europe.org/storage/app/media/uploaded-files/FACTSHEETS_%20IPPF_gender%20based%20violence_02-Acrobat4.pdf)
- 10 Council of the EU 18-months programme (1 January 2022 - 30 June 2023): <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14441-2021-INIT/en/pdf>
- 11 Twitter, Helena Dalli (@helenadalli): <https://twitter.com/helenadalli/status/1471779584983064576>
- 12 ECPDM Factsheet Taking the gender agenda forward in EU programming  
<https://ecdpm.org/wp-content/uploads/Taking-Gender-Agenda-Forward-EU-Programming-ECDPM-Discussion-Paper-297-2021.pdf>
- 13 Council of the EU 18-months programme (1 January 2022 - 30 June 2023): <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14441-2021-INIT/en/pdf>
- 14 85% of new programmes must have gender equality as one of their objectives and 5% as a main objective, and at least 20% of ODA must be dedicated to human development



IPPF European Network cares.

We are working through our 30 autonomous national **Member Associations** across Europe and Central Asia so that all women, men, children and young people can lead safe and dignified sexual and reproductive lives, free from harm and discrimination.