

# The upcoming Presidencies

## An opportunity for gender equality and SRHR



**Over the last few years, the EU has been facing many challenges in the realization of its core values: the rule of law, democracy, human rights, equality, especially 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.**

**T**he 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 upcoming three Council of the EU Presidencies – Sweden, Spain, and Belgium – have a critical role to play to uphold EU values. We call on them 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

**A**s demonstrated by EIGE's 2022 Gender Equality Index<sup>1</sup>, no EU Member State 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 and democracy, 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 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. 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>. SRHR are part of individual freedoms and a prerequisite for all of us to live free from coercion and violence. They are therefore critical to uphold democracy and EU values. Attacks on SRHR are a sign of a weakening democracy. They should be addressed urgently by the EU to guarantee that every European citizen's reproductive freedom is respected.

What is more, the war in Ukraine and the resulting population displacements have led to a critical situation in meeting the sexual and reproductive health needs of those displaced.

To ensure the safety and well-being of its citizens, and to address the alarming situation related to the war in Ukraine, the EU must counter this backsliding within and beyond its borders, resist the regressive measures illiberal groups seek to impose, and defend its values, including reproductive freedom.

# Our recommendations to the next Presidencies to lead the EU on a feminist path

## Adopt a feminist approach to EU policy-making

### 01

#### Strong political leadership for gender equality

The Council should pursue its commitments to “promote gender equality” and “respect for sexual and reproductive health and rights”<sup>5</sup>, priorities already highlighted by France, the Czech Republic, and Sweden in their 18-months programme. To achieve these objectives, the next three Presidencies should adopt a feminist approach to EU policies, both internal and external. The three next Presidencies are uniquely placed to do so: Sweden was a pioneer country in implementing a feminist foreign policy. Following its example, Spain has committed to implement a similar policy, as well as other EU and non-EU countries. An EU-wide feminist foreign policy should therefore be adopted and implemented. The upcoming Presidencies 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 a prerequisite for gender equality, freedom, and democracy.
- **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.

### 02

#### Counter opposition in the Council

Implementing 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 upcoming Presidencies 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 third countries.

### 03

#### 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 the 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 upcoming Presidencies 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 its trade policy and climate crisis response. Finally, to ensure effective implementation, the three next Presidencies 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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## 01 Within the EU

### 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 upcoming three Presidencies 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;
- **Adopt strong Council Conclusions on civic space under the Swedish Presidency,** which acknowledge the challenges and attacks faced by civil society organisations and human rights defenders, who work on SRHR, women's rights, gender equality, and LGBTIQ rights, and support them;
- **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 their disposal to ensure respect for EU values and apply sanctions whenever necessary, including:**

- **Political tools:** address breaches of the rule of law, and related human rights violations, through the Rule of law mechanism (through country-specific peer reviews) and Article 7 TEU (organise Hearings, adopt Recommendations, and vote to move toward sanctioning Poland);
- **Financial tools:** continue to block EU funds going to Poland, namely the COVID-19 Recovery Fund as well as structural Cohesion Funds, unless significant progress regarding the rule of law is made, and an efficient monitoring system is put in place.

### Health

Recent EIGE findings, from the 2022 Gender Equality Index, indicate that health inequalities have been widening. The three next Presidencies 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 upcoming Presidencies 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) 2022 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.

## 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 of both<sup>9</sup>. We ask upcoming Presidencies to pursue the former 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 next Presidencies should:**

- **Implement the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025**, and adopt Council Conclusions to commit to its objectives and review its implementation;
- **Follow up on the Mutual Learning Seminar<sup>11</sup>** on SRHR facilitated by the European Commission and co-led by France and Belgium on 29–30 November 2022, and organise regular similar exchanges to promote best practices on all aspects of SRHR;

**To tackle gender-based violence, the next Presidencies should:**

- **Prioritise the negotiations on the Directive on violence against women**, and ensure its swift adoption by the Council of the EU, without removing any provisions proposed by the European Commission<sup>12</sup>, especially the criminalization of rape with a consent-based definition;
- **Encourage all EU Member States to ratify the Istanbul Convention, and progress towards the EU accession to the Istanbul Convention** by qualified majority, as the Court of Justice of the EU confirmed as possible in its opinion issued on 6 October 2021<sup>13</sup>;
- **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.



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## 02 Outside the EU

2020 and 2021 marked key milestones: the Generation Equality Forum, the adoption of the NDICI Regulations, and the Gender Action Plan III that all highlighted the need to prioritise gender equality and SRHR in EU external actions. It is now time to uphold these commitments through effective implementation. To do so, the upcoming Presidencies 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;
- **Consider the need to allocate additional budget to the NDICI**, which is overstretched, due in particular to the consequences of the war in Ukraine. Allocating additional funding to gender equality and human development, including SRHR is particularly urgent.

**Monitor the implementation of the Gender Action Plan (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 under the Spanish presidency 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 access to and respect of SRHR, including access to SRH services and Comprehensive Sexuality Education.

**Monitor the implementation and ensure proper funding of the Youth Action Plan (YAP):**

- **Urge the European Commission to set up a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation mechanism**, including indicators to measure the YAP success
- **Encourage EU delegations to mainstream the YAP in their programming** and translate its commitments and priorities into concrete funding, programmes and actions;
- **Incorporate YAP commitments and priorities** in the upcoming mid-term review of the NDICI and the future EU's funding instruments for external action after 2027.

**Ensure the implementation of the recent Global Health Strategy (GHS)<sup>15</sup>:**

- **Adopt Council conclusions endorsing the GHS** and highlighting the importance of SRHR as a critical component of advancing Universal Health Coverage;

- Work with the European Commission **to set up a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation mechanism** which commits the European institutions and Member States to the achievement of the Strategy's objectives;
- **Ensure the Strategy's implementation is adequately resourced** with staff and funding to achieve its objectives.

### **Prioritise gender equality and SRHR in the EU relations with other regions:**

- **Pursue political dialogues around gender equality and SRHR with the African Union**, following the Summit organised in February 2022. Guarantee the inclusion and effective participation of African and European CSOs working on gender equality and SRHR in these dialogues.
- **Advocate for the swift ratification of the EU-ACP agreement** and its effective implementation as soon as possible;
- **During the EU-CELAC summit in July 2023, organise political dialogues around gender equality and SRHR** and include strong, precise, and binding commitments to gender equality and SRHR in the outcome document of the Summit.

### **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, in 2023;
- 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;

### **Ensure women human rights defenders are guaranteed the protection and support they need, under the revised EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders.**

**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.

1. EIGE Gender Equality Index 2022. <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-index-2022-covid-19-pandemic-and-care>
2. IPPF EN – EPF Abortion Atlas, September 2021. [https://europe.ippf.org/sites/ippf/files/2021-10/ABORT%20Atlas\\_EN%202021-v12.pdf](https://europe.ippf.org/sites/ippf/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.ippf.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. Mutual Learning Programme in gender equality, European Commission. [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/who-we-work-gender-equality/mutual-learning-programme-gender-equality\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/who-we-work-gender-equality/mutual-learning-programme-gender-equality_en)
12. European Commission Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on combating violence against women and domestic violence. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52022PC0105>
13. Court of Justice of the European Union Press Release on Opinion 1/19 on the Istanbul Convention, October 6 2021. <https://curia.europa.eu/jcms/upload/docs/application/pdf/2021-10/cp210176en.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
15. European Commission Global Health Strategy, November 30, 2022. [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_22\\_7153](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_7153)



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