

The upcoming Presidencies

An opportunity for gender equality and SRHR



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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 period is 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 defend them.

The EU should strive towards a world where everyone can enjoy the same rights, and lead free and safe lives, free from discrimination, coercion, and violence. In this crossroads moment, the upcoming three Council of the EU Presidencies – **Poland, Denmark and Cyprus** – **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

As demonstrated by EIGE's 2023 Gender Equality Index¹, **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 realisation of gender equality and democracy, are far from being achieved 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 to gender-specific healthcare services, such as abortion care², is particularly limited; and women and key population groups face sometimes insurmountable obstacles.

The **COVID-19 pandemic** has exacerbated existing inequalities in this regard³. 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. Furthermore, **rising authoritarianism, coercive and misogynistic movements** in Europe and the world⁴, have been threatening gender equality, women's rights, LGBTIQ rights and reproductive freedom, and the broader European values of human rights, liberal democracy, and the rule of law⁵. To ensure the safety and well-being of its citizens, the EU must counter this backsliding, and resist the regressive measures illiberal groups seek to impose and defending its values, including reproductive freedom.

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

Adopt a feminist EU political agenda

01

Strong political leadership for gender equality

The Council should pursue the previous Presidencies' commitments to "promote gender equality" and "respect for sexual and reproductive health and rights"⁶ and fight against gender-based violence⁷. The Council's working configurations should reflect these commitments to ensure a strong institutional backing for these objectives. **The upcoming Presidencies must:**

- **Institutionalise a Council working party dedicated to Equality**, including Gender Equality, or at least officially include Equality in the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs (EPSCO) working party;
- **Organise regular meetings of Equality Ministers**, to discuss gender equality issues including SRHR;

02

Feminist policy-making

Furthermore, feminism should be at the heart of the EU political agenda, both domestic and international.

The upcoming Presidencies must:

- **Adopt a feminist approach to EU policymaking:** show political will to make gender equality and SRHR a key priority in all EU policies, actions, and funding instruments; take an intersectional and gender-transformative approach to end unequal patriarchal power structures; mainstream these issues in all relevant Council work; and give them visibility, including through the organisation of **high-level Presidency events**;
- **Adopt strong political declarations**, in line with the joint Ministerial Declaration on the guarantee of SRHR in the EU issued under the Spanish Presidency⁸, which affirms that SRHR are at the core of fundamental EU values, as human rights, and a prerequisite for gender equality, freedom, and democracy following; and in line with the Joint Letter on the continuation and strengthening of gender and LGBTIQ equality in the European Union, which 17 Member States – including Poland, Cyprus, and Denmark – addressed to the European Commission in June 2024⁹;

03

Counter opposition in the Council

Implementing feminist policy-making 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. 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.

04

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 must:**

- **Support, 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. Ensure the diverse representation of CSOs during Council meetings.

Support the adoption of policies advancing gender equality and SRHR

On top of 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 work with partner countries to realise gender equality and SRHR for all, through its international cooperation, 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.



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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. SRHR are among the first rights to be undermined when the rule of law collapses¹⁰. 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^{11, 12}.

The upcoming Presidencies must:

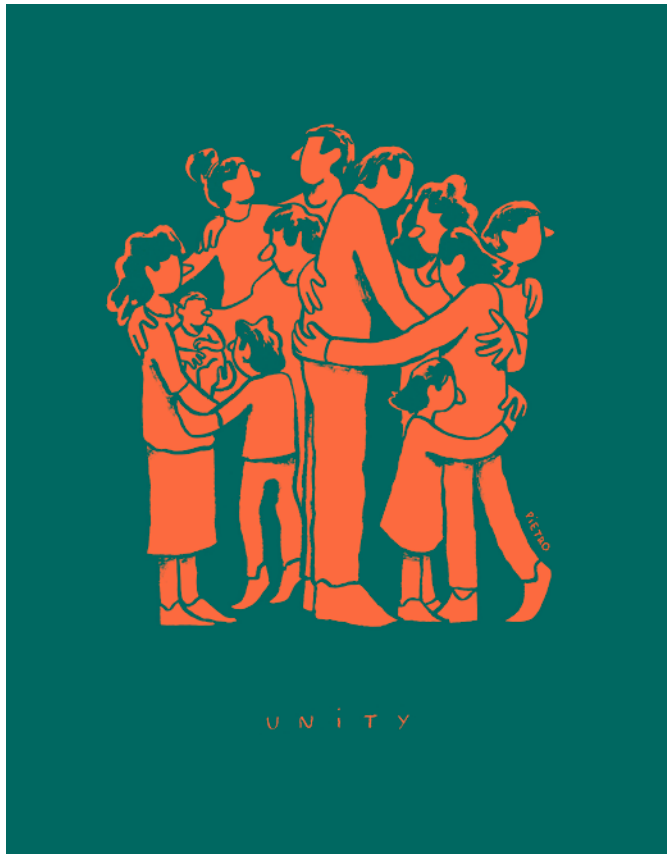
- **Launch a convention to amend the Treaties** and include SRHR in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU following the 2024 European Parliament resolution on this topic¹³;
- **Ensure an enabling civic space**, support the adoption of an EU Civil Society Strategy, and the establishment of a Protection Mechanism for Human Rights Defenders in the EU¹⁴, with particular attention paid to those who defend SRHR, women's rights, gender equality, and LGBTIQ rights;

- **Use all the tools at their disposal** to ensure respect for EU values and apply sanctions whenever necessary, including:
 - Monitor and **condemn any negative development** pertaining to women's rights in EU Member States; and broader EU values of fundamental rights, the rule of law, and democracy, including shrinking of the civic space, notably through so-called 'foreign agents' laws;
 - 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 adopt sanctions);
 - Support the broadening of the **conditionality regime** to all EU funds, based on respect for the rule of law and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, and block EU funds going to Member States that do not respect these values.

Health

The Presidencies should aim to reduce health inequalities, including gender and intersecting inequalities; promote equal access to health care, including sexual and reproductive health care, in particular for vulnerable groups (e.g. Roma women, LGBTIQ people, women with disabilities, etc.); address the specific health needs of certain populations (e.g. gender-specific health needs); and strengthen preventive measures, through health information and education, including comprehensive sexuality education. **The upcoming Presidencies must:**

- **Include a gender and intersectional perspective, and SRHR**, throughout all EU health policies, actions and funding;
- **Adopt Council Conclusions on gender equality in health**, including sexual and reproductive health, following up on the 2006 and 2009 Council Conclusions on gender and health¹⁵; and include SRHR in all Council Conclusions pertaining to health, including mental health.



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Gender equality and gender-based violence

The EU is committed to improving gender equality and tackling gender-based violence, with SRHR being an integral component of both. This commitment was highlighted by the adoption of the first-ever Directive on combating violence against women and girls in March 2024 under the Belgian Presidency¹⁶. Equality must remain at the core of the political agenda in this new mandate. To ensure equality for all is effectively achieved, long-term and sustained efforts are required.

To progress towards gender equality, the next Presidencies should:

- **Support the renewal of all the Union for Equality Agenda Strategies**, which should contain concrete commitments from the European Commission and Member States, have monitoring and accountability mechanisms, and funding attached to their implementation. Adopt Council Conclusions to fully endorse the Union of Equality Strategies;
- **The EU Gender Equality Strategy and the LGBTIQ Strategy** after 2025 should include strong commitments and concrete actions to advance SRHR. Through an intersectional approach to these strategies, ensure the needs of all people, and particularly those affected by intersecting forms of discrimination are addressed, including specific challenges when accessing SRHR;
- **The Roadmap for Women's Rights** should promote the highest standards of women's rights in the EU, including sexual and reproductive rights, and should also be formally adopted by Council Conclusions;
- **Encourage the European Commission to publish Recommendations** to Member States on the provision of SRHR and comprehensive sexuality education, and endorse them;
- **Follow up on the Mutual Learning Seminar¹⁷** 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;
- **Reaffirm the EU and Member States' commitment to the Beijing Platform for Action**, including to the full range of sexual and reproductive health and rights, by adopting Council Conclusions on Beijing+30, fully endorsing the recommendations of EIGE in its upcoming report.

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

- **Implement the Directive on violence against women, and actively engage with the European Commission in this regard.** Encourage the European Commission to organise workshops and exchanges of best practices between Member States, with the inputs of civil society organizations, and to publish Recommendations to ensure the full implementation of the Directive, including on the provision of sexuality and consent education and sexual and reproductive healthcare, in line with international standards;
- **Finalise the review of the Victims' Rights Directive** and ensure in particular the inclusion of sexual and reproductive health services for victims of sexual violence, and safe reporting for undocumented migrants;
- **Address violations of SRHR as forms of gender-based violence**, including obstetric and gynaecological violence throughout the reproductive life cycle — including during pregnancy, childbirth, the postpartum period, and abortion care; and intersex genital mutilation. Encourage the European Commission to tackle these forms of gender-based violence, including in the Recommendation on the prevention of harmful practices against women and girls, which should be published without delay;
- **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.

02. Outside the EU

The EU has strong policy frameworks and funding for gender equality and SRHR, including the EU Gender Action Plan III (GAP III) and the Global Health Strategy. The Council must uphold these commitments through giving them its political support, monitoring their effective implementation and keeping the European Commission accountable to its commitments.

To do so, the upcoming Presidencies must:

- **Adopt and implement an EU-wide intersectional feminist foreign policy**, applying a gender transformative, intersectional and decolonial approach to all areas of EU external action: human rights, international cooperation, humanitarian aid, but also enlargement, migration, security, climate, trade, economic policies and focusing on sustainable development priorities, rather than short-term political interests.
- **Monitor the implementation of key EU policy frameworks for SRHR**, in particular the Gender Action Plan III (GAP III), the Global Health Strategy, the Youth Action Plan and the Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy; and keep the European Commission accountable to its SRHR commitments in terms of political support and funding.
- **Ensure a renewed and strengthened Gender Action Plan (GAP IV) after 2027, building on the successes and lessons learnt of GAP III**, with strong support to SRHR, a robust intersectionality and gender-transformative approach, ensuring its implementation through earmarked funding and monitoring tools and ensure the close consultation of civil society organizations, including women's rights organisations and feminist movements in partner countries;
- **Support the renewal of the Youth Action Plan and the Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy**, with, for the latter, a stronger inclusion of SRHR, women's rights, LGBTIQ rights, and gender equality, stressing the importance to provide protection and support to women human rights defenders in partner countries.

- **Ensure women human rights defenders are guaranteed the protection and support** they need, under the revised EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders.
- **Ensure the implementation of the recent Global Health Strategy (GHS)¹⁸:**
 - 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;
 - Adopt Council Conclusions for the GHS mid-term review in 2026, highlighting in particular the importance of SRHR to achieve Universal Health Coverage (UHC).
- **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 latest EU-AU partnership in global health for equitable access event in March 2024. Guarantee the inclusion and effective participation of African and European CSOs working on gender equality and SRHR in these dialogues.
 - Monitoring the implementation of EU regional partnerships, and in particular the Samoa Agreement between the EU and Africa, Caribbean and Pacific states (ACP), and the EU-Africa partnership, to ensure the full implementation of gender equality, women's rights and SRHR commitments. Make sure these issues are at the core of any new (or renewed) bi-regional agreements.
 - Call on the European Commission to prioritise gender equality and SRHR in the new Pact for the Mediterranean to be developed in 2025.
 - Involve meaningfully civil society organizations from Europe and partner regions by regularly collecting their input and creating a permanent multistakeholder follow-up mechanism to any regional partnership following the EU-LAC CSOs recommendations in 2023¹⁹.

Adopt a feminist EU budget

During the next Trio, the Council will negotiate a new EU long-term budget (Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034), while continuing to monitor the implementation of the current MFF.

Regarding the implementation of the current MFF, the upcoming Presidencies must:

- Consider allocating 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.
- To do so, 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;
- Strengthen contribution to UNFPA Supplies Partnership and the Team Europe Initiative (TEI) on SRHR in sub-Saharan Africa as successful initiatives to achieve SRHR for all.
- Track the targets for gender equality and human development set in the NDICI²⁰, and adopt Council Conclusions on the European Commission and Member States' performance against those targets,

including recommendations on the way forward to achieve them;

In the new MFF, it will be crucial to mainstream a gender perspective across all EU funding instruments, and to guarantee sufficient targeted funding to advance gender equality, women's rights, and SRHR, within and outside of the EU.

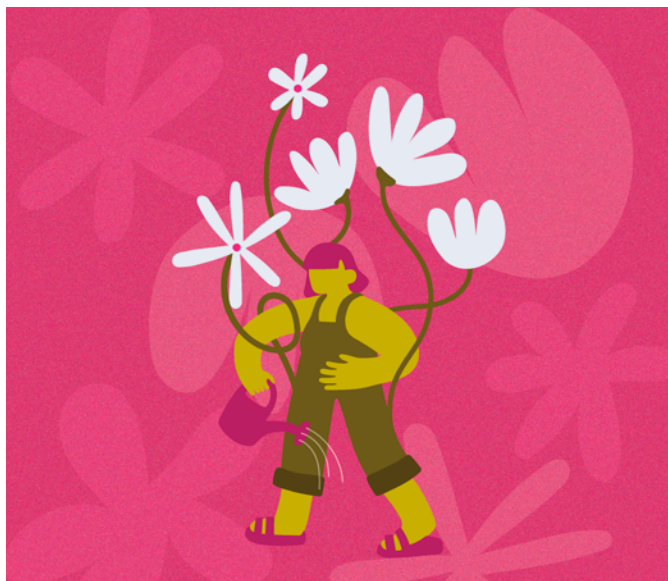
The upcoming Presidencies must:

- **Ensure smaller, grassroots, community-based, and more informal CSOs and movements have equal access to funding opportunities.** The EU should provide core, long-term, flexible funding to women's rights organisations, feminist and youth-led movements in and outside of the EU.
- **Through the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV)** new regulation: ensure sufficient financial support for women's rights and SRHR organisations and HRDs. CERV must remain under direct management of the European Commission, to fund independent CSOs working in hostile environments; and continue to support CSOs advancing women's rights and SRHR through the strand on gender equality.

- **Through the EU4Health Programme and European Social Fund + new regulations:** ensure funding to reduce health inequalities and improve access to SRH care, including initiatives aiming to guarantee access across Member States²¹.

The new political guidelines of the European Commission show clearly that it is going towards a "geoeconomic" approach, focusing on short-term economic interests of the EU rather than on long-term objectives of sustainable development highlighted in the EU treaties. Through the **Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI)** new regulation, **the upcoming Presidencies must:**

- **Ensure that the NDICI continues to aim at eradicating poverty, reducing inequalities and promoting sustainable development**, as highlighted in the EU treaties, the European Consensus on Development, the SDGs and the Agenda 2030. Increase the budget of the NDICI successor to make sure that it can respond to the magnitude of the global needs. Increase targeted funding for human development, health, SRHR and gender equality, as well as support for women's rights organisations and WHRDs.
- **Include in the renewed NDICI regulation commitments to achieve ambitious funding targets for human development and gender equality:** 85% of ODA should go to programmes where gender equality is a significant component and 20% of ODA should go to programmes where gender equality is the main component.
- **Establish specific funding mechanisms for local women's rights and SRHR organisations**, through core, sustainable and flexible funding.



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