



Illustration by Cecilia Castelli

Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights are Essential to Human Rights and Democracy

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Since the adoption of the current Human Rights and Democracy Action Plan (2020-2027), democracy and human rights have been under attack in all regions of the world. In Europe as well as globally, **sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) have especially been targeted**, with multiple attempts to restrict SRHR, women’s rights, civic space, and the rule of law. These developments are not incidental. **Gender equality and SRHR have become central political battlegrounds for undemocratic forces and the primary target of conservative and anti-rights mobilisation.** They are the first rights to be targeted before the rule of law and democracy in general is attacked. Far-right movements – which are globally connected and well-funded – are attempting to reframe and appropriate concepts historically rooted in feminist and LGBTIQ+ movements, stripping them of their empowering meaning and using them to advance exclusionary or nationalist agendas.

In this environment, **promoting and protecting civic space, SRHR, and gender equality is essential for the next EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy to achieve its objectives.** Civil society organisations (CSOs) defending SRHR, **women’s rights organisations (WROs)**, and **women human rights defenders (WHRDs)** face greater exposure to hostility and repression, including from governments. Many women and other marginalized people advocating for gender equality and SRHR and engaging in the democratic processes of their countries report facing violence, including sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), harassment, threats, online abuse, and defamation.

This violence deprives marginalised groups, especially women, of their basic human rights and constrains their participation in their countries’ political lives, effectively preventing broad and inclusive representation in democracy. In addition, **funding often remains difficult to access** and insufficient for those organisations, especially when they operate in restrictive settings, preventing them from protecting essential human rights and participating in democratic processes. Finally, **CSOs’ involvement in political dialogues has been more and more restricted** in past years, including at the EU level.

In addition, **promoting and protecting SRHR and gender equality in the next EU Action Plan is essential as they are closely connected to other human rights and to democratic participation.**



Illustration by Duru Yilmaz

SRHR are affirmed as Human Rights in the Beijing Platform for Action and the Program of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and they are essential to achieving other rights such as the right to respect for physical and mental integrity, private and family life, freedom of expression and information, equality and non-discrimination. However, legal restrictions, administrative barriers, and stigma continue to limit access to SRHR, especially to abortion, contraception, and maternal healthcare. These issues disproportionately affect those facing intersecting forms of discrimination, including young people, LGBTIQ+ individuals, migrants, racialised communities, and persons with disabilities.



Illustration by Burcu Köleli

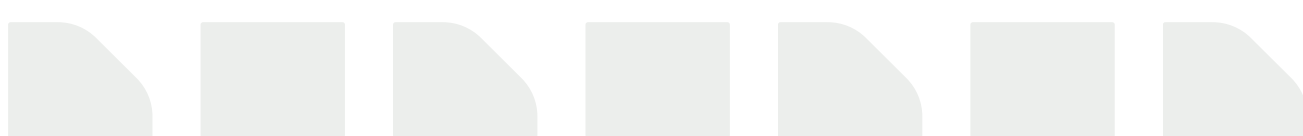
When people have access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, information, and comprehensive sexuality education, and when their sexual and reproductive rights are respected, they can make informed choices about their bodies and futures, allowing them to participate in the political, social, and economic lives of their countries and communities. **Investing in SRHR, combating coercion and violence, and promoting gender equality therefore strengthens communities, supports inclusive democratic processes, enables broader participation in democratic life, and contributes to protecting other human rights.**

Recommendations for the next EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy

Based on the situation highlighted above, IPPF EN therefore calls on the European Commission and the European External Action Service to:

Prioritise SRHR and gender equality in the next Action Plan through:

- **Recognising SRHR and the achievement of gender equality as structural components of the Action Plan** and ensuring their systematic integration as standalone priorities, but also their mainstreaming across all areas of action;
- **Strengthening coherence with other EU policy frameworks**, such as Gender Action Plan IV, and reinforcing a consistent human rights-based, intersectional, and gender-transformative approach across external action policy frameworks;



- **Integrating the protection of LGBTIQ+ rights across all areas of the next Action Plan**, acknowledging that criminalisation, institutional discrimination, and anti-LGBTIQ+ narratives are indicators of democratic backsliding and are closely connected to anti-gender groups;
- **Strongly and immediately denouncing human rights violations**, including attacks on women’s rights, SRHR and bodily autonomy, and signs of shrinking civic space, wherever they occur.

Protect civic space and CSOs through:

- **Unequivocally supporting the role of civil society actors worldwide** as service providers, watchdogs, advocates, and critical voices that contribute to democracy and human rights, and including the protection of civic space as a core pillar of the Action Plan;
- **Proactively engaging with representatives of marginalised groups**, reaching out beyond the “usual suspects” to include local CSOs, women’s rights organisations and feminist movements, CSOs outside of capitals, organisations representing indigenous people and people experiencing intersecting forms of discrimination, ensuring their meaningful and systematic participation in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the Action Plan at all levels;
- **Continuing efforts to ensure that EU protection mechanisms are adapted to the specific challenges**, including SGBV, digital abuse, legal intimidation, and administrative restrictions, **faced by WHRDs** and that they are accessible to them. The EU should, through these protection mechanisms, protect and support, including politically and financially, WHRDs;
- Encourage in the Action Plan **Member States to provide political and financial support** to WROs and WHRDs in external action.

Match the EU political commitment to human rights and democracy, including SRHR, with funding commitment through:

- **Funding the next EU Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy Action Plan through a dedicated thematic programme in the next Global Europe Instrument**, as a key tool to support an enabling environment for civil society and a rights-based agenda in EU external action;



Illustration by Bruna Borges Alves

- **Making funding available for gender equality and SRHR through concrete targets in the next Global Europe Instrument:**
 - Dedicate 85% of all EU ODA to programmes that have gender equality as one of their objectives (OECD marker G1 or G2)
 - Dedicate 20% of ODA to gender-targeted projects (OECD marker G2).
 - Dedicate at least 5% of ODA to supporting WROs, as they are critical actors to change harmful gender and social norms, protect rights, uphold democracy, and achieve gender equality and sustainable development. Yet, they remain critically underfunded with less than 1% of ODA directed to them, according to the OECD.
- **Providing direct, flexible, long-term, and core funding to CSOs**, including grassroots and local organisations, to strengthen sustainability and impact. This should include simplified application and reporting procedures to ensure access for grassroots organisations. CSO advocacy should be recognised as a legitimate use of EU funding as CSOs are critical voices that contribute to informed, effective, and inclusive policymaking and democracy.

The next EU Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy presents a **unique opportunity for the EU to recommit to human rights, and in particular SRHR and gender equality, as key EU values and essential components of EU external action**. Only by fully and explicitly including SRHR and gender equality in the next Action Plan can the EU achieve its commitments to protect and support human rights and democracy worldwide.



Illustration by Tanya Shyika