

*With the support of the European Women's Lobby<sup>1</sup>*

## **Reaction to the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 with a focus on SRHR**

We welcome the publication of the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 by the European Commission. The adoption of this Strategy shows the political leadership and commitment of the Commission to promote gender equality within and outside the EU, with important objectives and actions for the next 5 years.

As civil society organisations (CSOs) committed to advancing gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) in the EU and globally, we would like to make suggestions on how the Strategy can effectively promote and support the realisation of SRHR in the EU, as this is a precondition to the achievement of gender equality.

This will be particularly essential in the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic, as we are already observing renewed threats to women's human rights, SRHR and increased risks of gender-based violence. These challenges will require the adoption of targeted and specific responses and actions by the EU and Member States. We stand ready to share information and ideas about these new challenges and how they can be addressed.

- **Actions to support sexual and reproductive health and rights**

We welcome the references to **SRHR** in the Strategy, both in the sections on Gender Mainstreaming in relation to health policies, and on External Policies. This provides important recognition that SRHR is an integral part of healthcare and represents a first step towards affirming the intrinsic links between SRHR and gender equality.

Exchanges of good practices between Member States and stakeholders on SRHR are an important initiative, in which the participation and expertise of CSOs will be key. However, we believe that it would be important to complement such exchanges with additional actions to further the implementation of the **ICPD Programme of Action**, the **Beijing Platform for Action** and the outcomes of their review conferences, and the **SDGs** in the EU. The monitoring of SDGs including SDG 5 in the European Semester is a positive step. We believe that more robust monitoring by the EU and Member States of all SDG targets is needed, including 3.7, 5.3 and 5.6, through the adoption of adequate indicators in line with the UN global indicators framework, the collection of comparable and disaggregated data, and the development of studies on access to the full range of SRHR services in the EU. We would also encourage the Commission to support Member States in strengthening their national health systems, including SRHR services, harmonising national health policies, and raising awareness of SRHR, in order to reduce disparities in access to SRHR between and within Member States.

- **Prevention of gender-based violence through comprehensive sexuality education**

We welcome the strong emphasis put in the Strategy on **ending gender-based violence and challenging harmful gender stereotypes**. We particularly appreciate the focus on effective prevention, through education of boys and girls from an early age about gender equality and non-violent relationships, with a focus on men and boys. Rigid gender norms around femininity and masculinity are indeed at the root of gender-based violence, and tackling toxic masculinities is crucial. We believe that **comprehensive sexuality education (CSE)** is key to building the knowledge and skills young people need to form safe relationships and protect themselves from violence. In partnership with CSOs, the Commission could support CSE and awareness-raising campaigns, to tackle the root causes of gender-based violence.

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<sup>1</sup> While the European Women's Lobby and its members are developing comprehensive recommendations on the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, the EWL expresses its support to the present document focused on SRHR.

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The EU accession to the Istanbul Convention should remain an utmost priority. In parallel, the Commission should propose including all forms gender-based violence in the list of Eurocrimes in 2021. We also welcome the recognition of specific forms of gender-based violence in the Strategy, such as forced abortion and forced sterilization, FGM and other harmful practices. We hope that the implementation of the Strategy addresses the **full continuum of all forms of gender-based violence**, including violations of women's SRHR such as gynecological and obstetrical violence and denial of abortion care. These can amount to violence against women, as underlined by the European Parliament and international bodies. Ensuring access to SRH services for survivors of gender-based violence is also crucial.

- **Gender mainstreaming and intersectionality**

We welcome the Strategy's dual approach of targeted measures and **gender mainstreaming**. The creation of the Equality Task Force composed of representatives of all Commission services will be key for the inclusion of a gender perspective in all EU policies and funding. As CSOs, we stand ready to contribute to its work.

We also welcome the adoption of **intersectionality** as a cross-cutting principle, to ensure the needs of women and men in all their diversity are addressed through an inclusive and non-stigmatising approach. We are available to provide input on how to implement the intersectionality principle in concrete and effective ways, including in relation to SRHR.

- **Facing backlash: Adopting strategic actions to ensure continued progress for women's human rights and prevent potential challenges and opposition to it**

In past decades, many advances have been made towards gender equality, but this progress has slowed. An increasing **backlash** against women's human rights, SRHR and gender equality in the EU has led to retrogressive initiatives and a worsening access to SRHR in several Member States, according to EIGE's [report](#). We need concerted efforts to ensure those working against this progress cannot succeed. To effectively implement the Strategy, we hope that the Commission adopts concrete and progressive actions to ensure continued progress for women's human rights and contribute to countering this backwards trend. We stand ready to provide suggestions to support the Commission in strengthening its efforts in this regard.

As alluded to in the Strategy, support to CSOs which promote women's human rights, SRHR, gender equality, and combat gender-based violence in the EU is critical. We believe that the Commission should strengthen such support, including through increased funding under the **Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme**. Furthermore, it is vital that the Commission monitor and respond to proposals in Member States that would undermine gender equality, SRHR, or the ability of CSOs active in this field to operate freely and effectively.

- **Collaborating with civil society organisations in the implementation and monitoring of the Strategy**

We welcome the creation of a framework to monitor the implementation of the Strategy, with annual progress reports based on examples of good practices from Member States and relevant data. As mentioned in the Strategy, the results of this monitoring should be taken into account to update and supplement the actions taken under the Strategy.

We also welcome the recognition of the need for the EU and Member States to deepen their engagement with CSOs and women's rights organisations, as they are crucial actors for gender-equal societies. We believe that CSOs must be fully involved in the effective implementation, monitoring and updating of the Strategy in the next 5 years.