

Ensuring the inclusion of sexual and reproductive health and rights in the Gender Equality Strategy 2026-2030

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The European Commission has a clear mandate, within the EU's areas of competence, to promote respect for gender equality, women's fundamental rights and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). The Commission's next Gender Equality Strategy represents a critical opportunity to ensure that SRHR is a key priority for the EU in efforts to ensure continued progress on guaranteeing women's rights and gender equality across the EU in years to come.

EU member states have some of the strongest legal protections for SRHR worldwide and many are making sustained progress to improve access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services, information and education. However, important barriers and shortcomings remain, including disparities between and within member states, preventing the full enjoyment of SRHR for all across the EU. In particular, individuals experiencing marginalisation and multiple forms of discrimination face significant barriers in access to essential services and resulting harm. Indeed no member state fully guarantees all aspects of SRHR, and these shortcomings and gaps continue to hinder the full enjoyment of women's rights and gender equality across the EU.¹

The next Gender Equality Strategy comes at a critical time for women's rights, gender equality and SRHR. Continued progress on SRHR across Europe and globally is facing unprecedented challenges and risks of regressing or stalling. At this time, it is vital that the EU robustly supports gender equality and SRHR and redoubles its commitment to promote these rights across member states and globally. The EU must also take strong positions against any roll backs or threats to SRHR which would undermine progress on gender equality.

In many contexts the challenges now confronting continued progress on gender equality and SRHR are interlinked with democratic backsliding and erosion of the rule of law. The Gender Equality Strategy must pay particular attention to these linkages and also ensure cohesion with the forthcoming Civil Society Strategy.

The Gender Equality Strategy is an opportunity for the EU to fully and effectively translate the vision outlined in the 2025 Roadmap for Women's Rights into effective and concrete actions to ensure stronger legal and policy frameworks and support to civil society working to advance these rights across the EU. The next Gender Equality Strategy must be ambitious in commitments and actions to advance SRHR to respond to the current challenges.

This submission outlines recommendations for EU action to advance SRHR in line with some of the key principles outlined in the Roadmap for Women's Rights, namely Principle 1 (freedom from gender-based violence), Principle 2 (the highest standard of health), Principle 5 (quality and inclusive education) and Principle 8 (institutional mechanisms that deliver on women's rights).

Principle 1: Freedom from gender-based violence

The Gender Equality Strategy should reaffirm the Commission's commitment to the elimination of all forms of gender-based violence, including in the context of SRHR, and outline further effective measures to prevent and address gender-based violence and ensure that survivors have access to support services, justice and reparations. This requires efforts to ensure ratification of the Istanbul Convention by all member states, adoption of guidance for member states on implementation of the Violence against Women Directive, and publication of the Recommendation on Harmful Practices.

Recommendations:

Comprehensive measures to address gender-based violence:

- Encourage and support member states to ratify and effectively implement the Istanbul Convention.

Support services for survivors of gender based violence, including health care:

- Issue clear evidence-based guidelines to member states on implementing the Directive to Combat Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence and in particular the obligation to provide victims of sexual violence with comprehensive sexual and reproductive health care and adopt preventive measures such as education programmes on violence against women.
- Support targeted public awareness campaigns across the EU on the entitlement of survivors of sexual violence to support services and essential sexual and reproductive health care.
- Ensure the recast Directives on Establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime and on Combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child sexual abuse material include an obligation for member states to provide comprehensive sexual and reproductive health care to victims of crime and child victims of sexual abuse or exploitation.

Preventing and combating harmful practices:

- Publish the Recommendation on Harmful Practices including actions to tackle forced and coercive sterilisation, intersex genital mutilation, abuse, mistreatment, violence and neglect in obstetric and gynaecological settings and ensure respectful and high quality obstetric, gynaecological, antenatal, childbirth and postnatal care.
- Provide guidance and support to member states in adopting comprehensive inquiry and reparation schemes to redress past practices of forced and coercive sterilisation in line with international standards.

Principle 2: The highest standards of health

The Commission has an important role to play in promoting and supporting member states' efforts to guarantee SRHR and implement their international human rights obligations and discharge duties to comply with the founding values in Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union and the rights enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights. The past policy cycle saw great progress in advancing standards on gender equality, including SRHR, in EU law and policy. The Gender Equality Strategy should build on these strong foundations and set out clear and ambitious commitments and actions to advance SRHR to achieve the highest standards of health across the EU. This requires a range of law and policy measures to support and complement member state action to guarantee equal access to quality sexual and reproductive health services.

In addition, a key focus should be placed in the next Strategy on monitoring and effectively responding to threats of regression on gender equality and SRHR across member states and at EU level. The Strategy should clearly affirm that rollbacks on gender equality and SRHR are contrary to EU values and member states' obligations under the EU treaties.

Recommendations:

Supporting and complementing action by member states regarding access to SRHR:

The European Commission should use all legislative and policy powers within its areas of competence to support member state efforts to ensure that across the EU individuals can make free and informed decisions about their health and have access to quality sexual and reproductive health services, information and education including modern contraception, obstetric and gynaecological care, safe and legal abortion, menstrual health, assisted reproduction and comprehensive sexuality education.

- Issue clear recommendations to member states on provision of quality abortion care in line with public health and human rights standards.
- Present a legislative proposal to establish a financing mechanism for access to abortion care across borders in the EU, on the basis of the European Citizens' Initiative "My Voice My Choice."
- Ensure the removal of the exclusion for abortion medication and contraception from the scope of the revised Directive on Medicinal Products for Human Use.
- Work with member states and the European Medicines Agency to ensure the inclusion of essential sexual and reproductive health medicines such as abortion medication and contraception on the Union List of Critical Medicines in line with the WHO Essential Medicines List.
- Ensure that EU law on professional qualifications and its implementation enables midwives to exercise their profession across member states in line with international recommendations on midwifery practice.
- Adopt a Women's Health Strategy, covering all key aspects of women's health including SRHR.

- Undertake evidence-based research on menstrual health to inform policy initiatives and programmes to respond to menstrual poverty in the EU and the socio-economic impacts and other challenges faced by menstruating people, and issue guidelines to member states on menstrual health reflecting international standards on access to safe and affordable period products, to clean water and safe and private sanitation facilities, to inclusive and accurate menstrual health knowledge, information, and education, to care, treatment and timely diagnosis for menstrual discomfort and disorders, and fostering a taboo- and stigma-free environment.
- Ensure appropriate action, including infringement proceedings, to address severe forms of discrimination against Roma women in reproductive health care settings, undertake a comprehensive study on the SRHR of Roma women and girls across the EU to identify systemic failures and shortcomings in ensuring effective protection against discrimination, and adopt a strategy with targeted and specific actions to address persisting inequalities and rights violations with regard to SRHR.

Responding to threats of SRHR regression:

- Actively and regularly monitor the situation of SRHR in member states with a view to quickly responding to retrogressive threats.
- Ensure compliance with EU values and address regressive measures that weaken SRHR protections and the work of civil society organisations working on equality, women's rights and SRHR, including as part of the Commission's annual rule of law monitoring.
- Hold an annual high level exchange with the Commissioner for Equality, the European Institute for Gender Equality, the Fundamental Rights Agency and the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights with the participation of civil society on barriers and shortcomings regarding SRHR across the EU.

Principle 6: Quality and inclusive education

Comprehensive, evidence-based, scientifically accurate, age-appropriate and quality sexuality education (CSE) is vital to advancing gender equality and enabling young people to learn about and develop attitudes and skills that contribute to safe, healthy and positive relationships. It is also essential in raising awareness of fundamental rights, including SRHR, and preventing misinformation, disinformation and stigma around sexual and reproductive health.² The Commission can play a key role in supporting efforts to improve access to quality CSE in line with international standards.

Recommendation:

Promoting comprehensive sexuality education:

- Issue clear recommendations to member states on the provision of comprehensive sexuality education in line with international standards.

Principle 8: Institutional mechanisms that deliver on women's rights

The next Gender Equality Strategy must be underpinned by institutional structures and approaches and sufficient institutional capacity and financial resources for its effective delivery and implementation. It must ensure integration of an intersectional approach addressing the multiple and intersecting forms of inequality and discrimination affecting women in the EU; effective gender mainstreaming across EU policy development, implementation and evaluation; strengthened collection of disaggregated data on SRHR to enable evidence-based approaches; and strong support for civil society and human rights defenders at the frontlines of advancing gender equality and SRHR

Furthermore, it will be critical for the EU to remain a champion for gender equality and SRHR across Europe and globally in its development and foreign policy.

Recommendations:

Collaboration with and support for civil society:

- Strengthen EU support for human rights defenders and organisations working on gender equality and SRHR as vital partners for advancing gender equality across the EU.
- Ensure the upcoming Civil Society Strategy and any protection mechanism for human rights defenders and civil society organisations in the EU take into account and effectively addresses the specific needs of women human rights defenders and SRHR defenders.
- Affirm a clear commitment to hold regular consultations with civil society throughout the course of the implementation and assessment of the Gender Equality Strategy.

Ensuring effective integration of intersectionality and gender mainstreaming:

- Ensure intersectionality is a cross-cutting principle throughout the Gender Equality Strategy and that actions implemented under the Strategy take account of and respond to the specific needs of marginalised groups including Roma women, ethnic minorities, LGBTIQ women, asylum seeking, refugee and migrant women, women living with disabilities, young and older women, and that the Strategy maintains an inclusive definition of women recognising their diversity.
- Ensure gender equality and SRHR considerations are mainstreamed across all relevant policy areas and strengthen structures, approaches and tools in this regard including in the context of the EU budget.

Data collection and evidence-based research:

- Ensure the collection of disaggregated data to allow for evidence-based policy making, monitoring and analysis of shortcomings in guaranteeing gender equality and SRHR.
- Request the European Institute for Gender Equality to monitor and track the state of SRHR across the EU by including key indicators on SRHR in the Gender Equality Index, including on maternal mortality and morbidity, reproductive autonomy, and access to health services and unmet needs.

- Request the EU Fundamental Rights Agency to undertake a study on intersectional forms of discrimination in the area of SRHR across EU member states to identify systemic shortcomings.

Global leadership on gender equality and SRHR:

- Adopt the next Gender Action Plan IV by 2027 with robust commitments and actions to advance SRHR globally and ensure that all external action strategies and programmes promote and support the full implementation of international human rights obligations and standards on SRHR.
- Adopt a new EU Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security that gives priority to supporting SRHR for all women affected by conflict and promoting accountability and reparations for SRHR violations in line with international human rights standards and recommendations.
- Issue EU guidelines mandating that EU-led humanitarian responses systematically include support and financing for sexual and reproductive health supplies and services as outlined in the Minimum Initial Service Package for Sexual and Reproductive Health in crisis situations (MISP for SRH).³
- Update the EU guidelines on violence against women and girls and combating all forms of discrimination against them to ensure they reflect current international standards.
- Ensure the appointment of a gender focal point in all EU delegations as a dedicated and distinct role with a clear mandate to promote gender equality and SRHR and provide regular training for relevant EU staff and EU delegations on gender equality and SRHR.

Sustainable funding for gender equality policies and women's rights organisations:

- Ensure the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) includes adequate funding for:
 - supporting and complementing member states' actions to promote access to sexual and reproductive healthcare;
 - strengthening the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme to fund the work of civil society organisations to advance gender equality, women's rights and SRHR in the EU including through advocacy efforts; civil society organisations working to advance health protection across the EU, including in the area of sexual and reproductive health.
 - the next international cooperation instrument to support civil society organisations globally working to advance gender equality and SRHR.

¹ Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Sexual and reproductive health and rights in Europe: Progress and Challenges. Follow-up report to the 2017 Issue Paper, 2024.

² WHO UNESCO UN-Women UNICEF UNFPA UNAIDS, International technical guidance on sexuality education: an evidence-informed approach, 2018; Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Sexual and reproductive health and rights in Europe: Progress and Challenges. Follow-up report to the 2017 Issue Paper, 2024.

³ Inter-Agency Working Group for Reproductive Health in Crisis, Minimum Initial Service Package for Sexual and Reproductive Health in crisis situations.