

Our collective vision for gender equality in the EU

Joint CSO Statement

10 December 2024

We unite today to put forward our shared vision for the future of gender equality in the European Union (EU). We call on the EU to work over the next five years towards the practical realisation of a Union where everyone can live in safety, free from discrimination and violence, and where gender equality is not just an aspiration but a lived reality for all - regardless of their gender, ethnicity, race, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, sex characteristics, disability, residence status, social class, age, among others.

The last mandate saw notable initiatives to advance gender equality. However, despite these achievements, striking inequalities remain. As the new European Commission is taking office, we request the EU institutions and Member States to redouble their efforts and to ensure that advancing gender equality remains a key priority mainstreamed throughout EU laws and policies for the next 5 years, with the necessary resources allocated.

In particular, we call on the EU to ensure the highest level of ambition is reflected in the upcoming Roadmap for Women's Rights and the Gender Equality Strategy post-2025, particularly geared towards achieving the following objectives:

*** Realising the full range of women's rights**

We urge the EU to promote the highest standards of women's rights across all Member States. In particular, increased action at EU-level is necessary on the following issues:

Upholding sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR): Despite SRHR being integral to EU values of fundamental rights and gender equality, serious disparities remain in ensuring equal access across the EU. These gaps arise from a lack of robust EU standards, despite Member States' binding international human rights obligations and substantial political commitments to SRHR. We call on the EU to:

- Fully utilise its existing competences to advance SRHR in EU law and policy and issue clear guidelines to Member States on SRHR in line with international standards;
- Strengthen EU actions and funding to improve access to sexual and reproductive healthcare and reduce health inequalities in and across EU Member States;
- Heed calls from the European Parliament to enshrine the rights to abortion and bodily autonomy in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, and SRHR in the Treaties;
- Ensure any rollbacks of existing entitlements and threats thereof be swiftly addressed and vehemently opposed as contrary to EU values.

Combating the backlash against gender equality: The growing opposition to gender equality risks rolling back existing entitlements, directly contradicting the EU's founding values. To counter this, the EU must:

- Take robust action to combat anti-rights narratives and actors;
- Issue strong political condemnation and adopt sanctions against Member States that undermine gender equality, as well as women's, LGBTIQ people's and reproductive rights.

Protecting Women Human Rights Defenders and their organisations: Across Europe, human rights defenders are increasingly at risk. Among them are women human rights defenders (WHRDs), who play a vital role as frontline advocates for gender equality and equal rights across the EU. Both because of who they are and because of what they stand for, WHRDs face heightened levels of attacks, harassment and threats, online and offline, smear campaigns, judicial harassment, and the defunding of their organisations. The EU must:

- Take decisive action to ensure that human right defenders - in particular WHRDs - receive robust political support and comprehensive protection in the EU; and that their organisations receive adequate funding.

* Ending sexual and gender-based violence

The EU's accession to the Istanbul Convention and the adoption of the EU Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence (VAW) were important steps forward to ensure the prevention, support and protection of victims of sexual and gender-based violence. It is imperative we now focus on its practical implementation.

Implementing the Directive on VAW: The European Commission must provide clear guidelines, and Member States must integrate the expertise of CSOs to:

- **Strengthen primary prevention:** Prevention must go beyond awareness-raising campaigns to actively stop gender-based violence (GBV) from occurring. A comprehensive approach to primary prevention should include peer education, feminist self-defence, school-based programs; the provision of training to transform societal norms that perpetuate violence; and foster bystander intervention. These measures are essential for building a future free of GBV.
- **Provide comprehensive sexuality education:** Mandatory comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is a cornerstone of primary prevention. In line with international standards and the Directive, Member States must ensure the provision of CSE, which includes education on consent.
- **Secure the rights of victims and survivors.** Member States must guarantee the rights and respond to the needs of all victims and survivors, especially those facing intersecting oppressions, including LGBTIQ women, racialized women, women with dependent residence permit, undocumented migrant women, women sex workers, women in exploitative or trafficking situations, women with disabilities and other marginalised groups. Victims of sexual violence in particular must be guaranteed full access to support services, including comprehensive sexual and reproductive healthcare.

Going beyond the Directive on VAW: To address the full spectrum of GBV and ensure no one is left behind, the EU and its Member States must also:

- Include gender-based violence (GBV) as a crime in the EU Treaties.
- Recognise that sex without consent is rape and establish EU-wide consent-based definitions of rape and other sexual violence crimes.
- Address all violations of SRHR, such as obstetric and gynaecological violence, intersex genital mutilation and the denial of abortion and post-abortion care, including through formulating clear recommendations on these harmful practices to member states, in line with international guidelines.
- Establish safeguards to ensure the rights of women who are undocumented, or have precarious residence status. More likely to experience violence and abuse precisely because their status puts them in a situation of vulnerability, it is of utmost importance that they are able to safely report violence and abuse and file complaints.
- Address the disproportionate impact of the criminal justice system on marginalized communities: While criminal law plays an important role in ensuring accountability, systemic biases in law enforcement and justice disproportionately police and criminalize groups like undocumented people, sex workers, LGBTIQ individuals, and racialized communities, worsening their vulnerabilities and denying them access to justice. We encourage the EU to prioritize community-led solutions and focus on healthcare, housing, education, and welfare.

* **Responding to intersectional discrimination and oppression**

The upcoming Roadmap for Women's Rights and the Gender Equality Strategy must adopt a robust intersectional approach to tackle the structural systems of oppression perpetuating gender inequality. Achieving gender equality requires addressing overlapping forms of discrimination that affect different groups, in particular LGBTIQ people (including LGBTIQ women), racialized women, women with dependent residence permit, undocumented migrant women, women sex workers, women in exploitative or trafficking situations, women with disabilities, and other marginalised groups.

A feminist and intersectional perspective must be integrated across all EU policy areas, including those within the Union of Equality Agenda (e.g. LGBTIQ, Anti-Racism, Child Rights, Disability, Roma Rights), as well as areas such as migration, victims' rights, social inclusion, health, long-term care, early childhood education, digital rights, employment, education, disinformation, and foreign policy.

* **Ensuring sufficient funding for these objectives**

Sufficient, sustainable, and long-term funding is essential to ensure that the policies and initiatives needed to achieve gender equality are fully implemented, and that civil society organisations (CSOs) working towards gender equality remain resilient in the face of political and societal backlash. As the EU begins negotiations on the next Multiannual Financial Framework next year, we call for:

- Gender budgeting throughout the entire budgetary process, with targeted budget lines for gender equality and anti-discrimination initiatives, with an intersectional perspective.
- Continued support to CSOs, particularly those working in hostile environments, through funds under direct management by the European Commission.
- Increased accessibility of EU funding for grassroots and community-based organisations; notably through regrants schemes that alleviate financial and administrative burdens on smaller organisations.
- Safeguards to ensure that no EU funds are ever provided to Member States or groups that violate the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

* **Our Call to Action**

We urge the EU institutions and Member States to join us in building a more just and equal society. Gender equality must remain a top priority in all EU policy processes over the next five years. Let us work together to ensure that women and girls in all their diversity in the EU can live free from violence, discrimination, and oppression.

Note: Our organisations work on a diverse range of women's rights issues. In the drafting of this document, we have been led by the expertise of women's rights organisations and women human rights defenders from communities most impacted by the specific forms of violence described in each section. Our commitment to the text above represents our coming together as a collective with shared values, even though not every organisation has its own policy or programme of work dedicated to each issue.

SIGNATORIES

AGE Platform Europe

Amnesty International

Center for Reproductive Rights

EL*C - Eurocentralasian Lesbian* Community

End FGM European Network

European Sex Workers Rights Alliance

IGLYO

ILGA-Europe

International Planned Parenthood Federation European Network (IPPF EN)

La Strada International - European NGO Platform against Human Trafficking

Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM)

Protection International

Organisation Intersex International Europe - OII Europe