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Call on Ursula von der Leyen to strongly support and defend Gender Equality and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR)

Joint statement

As Members of the European Parliament and representatives of MEPs for Sexual and Reproductive Rights and the pro-choice network ALL of US we call on the newly elected President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen to protect and further strengthen gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights in the work programme for the European Commission 2019-2024.

The principle that men and women should receive equal pay for equal work has been enshrined in the European Treaties since 1957. Today, inside the EU, its institutions work on promoting equal economic independence for women and men, closing the gender pay gap, advancing gender balance in decision-making and ending gender-based violence. Gender equality is enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU and the EU is further promoting gender equality outside of its borders. Attacks on women's rights and gender equality are attacks on fundamental rights and values, including democracy and the rule of law. Conversely, everybody benefits from the positive effects of gender equality policies – socially, politically and economically. The value of gender equality is also close to the hearts of European citizens – according to a 2017 Eurobarometer survey, 91% of Europeans believe that promoting it is important to ensuring a fair and democratic society.

Around the world, every day about 830 women die from pregnancy or childbirth related complications; 214 million women want to prevent or postpone pregnancy, but do not have access to modern methods of contraception; around 25 million unsafe abortions are estimated to take place every year; more than 200 million girls and women have been forced to undergo female genital mutilation (FGM); four in ten women aged 20-24 in Sub-Saharan Africa were married before the age of 18; one in three women have experienced physical or sexual violence. Promoting and investing in sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) saves lives, improves health and contributes to realising human rights.

SRHR underpin the health and well-being of all – from access to comprehensive relationship and sexuality education for all children, contraceptive and abortion care, sexual health services, to being protected from violence and coercion, regardless of their gender or sexual orientation. The ability to access these services is a key prerequisite to achieving gender equality. Unfortunately, access to SRHR varies greatly also within

and between EU Member States, which is particularly harmful to those in the most vulnerable situations.^[1] At the same time, persisting gender inequalities are a key cause of the non-fulfilment of sexual and reproductive rights and must be addressed to eliminate dangerous and discriminatory healthcare practices and reproductive coercion.

Recent years have seen a rise of coercive movements both within and outside of the EU, with gender equality, women's rights, LGBTI rights, and reproductive freedom increasingly under attack. These movements seek to deny sexual and reproductive health and rights, women's rights and the human rights of LGBTI people amongst others. Regressive forces and ultra-conservative religious actors are trying to undo decades of human rights advances and impose a harmful worldview about gender roles in family and public lives. It must be highlighted that their concerted efforts are utterly at odds with the European values of democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities.

Moreover, these coercive movements and ultra-conservative religious actors are increasingly linked with far right or illiberal movements and parties in Europe which threaten European values, fundamental rights and democracy in general. Their funding and genuine goals often lack transparency.^[2] They seek to overturn existing laws on basic human rights related to sexuality and reproduction, such as the right to divorce; access to modern forms of contraception; assisted reproduction technologies; access to stem-cell research; access to safe and legal abortion; equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex (LGBTI) persons.^[3]

Recent examples of these efforts include: 1. the 2015 European Citizens' Initiative ONE OF US – an attempt to stigmatize abortion by focusing on funding; 2. the 2016 proposed bill for a complete ban on abortion in Poland; 3. campaigns against the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence across Europe which have led to Bulgaria and Slovakia rejecting its ratification;^[4] 4. the ban on Gender Equality studies from Hungarian universities in 2018 by the Orban government.

In order to counter further attempts to restrict reproductive freedom and gender equality, we urge Ursula von der Leyen, the new President of the European Commission, to include the following objectives in the work programme for the European Commission 2019-2024:

- **Adopt a binding EU Strategy for Gender Equality and an LGBTI strategy and work towards the eradication of gender inequality and violence against women and gender-based violence and ensure that standards needed to achieve this are put in place.**
- **Safeguard the right of all Europeans to live free and safe reproductive lives without discrimination and include the promotion and improvement of sexual and reproductive health and rights in the next EU's Public Health Strategy.**
- **Firmly denounce regressive discourse and prevent the enactment of laws and policies that undermine women's rights, gender equality, sexual and reproductive health and rights and LGBTI rights, reiterating that those retrograde measures have no place in a democratic XXI century Europe.**
- **Invest EU resources and make a political priority out of delivering far-reaching initiatives to change harmful social norms through education and empowerment, to defend women's rights, gender equality and LGBTI rights.**
- **Provide political and financial support to women's rights groups and human rights defenders, particularly those working in challenging contexts in Europe, including in EU member states and implement gender-responsive approaches to budgeting in a way that explicitly tracks what proportion of public funds are targeted on women.**

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[1] European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual & Reproductive Rights, Contraception Atlas 2019, <https://www.contraceptioninfo.eu/>

[2] Open Democracy, 20 March 2019, Revealed: US anti-LGBT 'hate group' dramatically increases UK spending, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/revealed-us-anti-lgbt-hate-group-dramatically-increases-uk-spending/>

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/revealed-trump-linked-us-christian-fundamentalists-pour-millions-of-dark-money-into-europe-boosting-the-far-right/>; Open Democracy, 27 March 2019, Revealed: dozens of European politicians linked to US 'incubator for extremism'
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/revealed-dozens-of-european-politicians-linked-to-us-incubator-for-extremism/>

[3] Neil Datta, 2018, Restoring the Natural Order: The religious extremists' vision to mobilize European societies against human rights on sexuality and reproduction, p. 2, <https://www.epfweb.org/node/690>.

[4] Euractiv, 23 February 2018, After Bulgaria, Slovakia too fails to ratify the Istanbul Convention, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/future-eu/news/after-bulgaria-slovakia-too-fails-to-ratify-the-istanbul-convention/>

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