

To: Ms Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission

Cc: Ms Stella Kyriakides, European Commissioner for Health
Ms Helena Dalli, European Commissioner for Equality

23 October 2024

Re: Forthcoming European Commission Recommendation on harmful practices

Dear President von der Leyen,

As civil society organisations, healthcare professionals and academics working to advance women's rights and the rights of LGBTI people, we are writing to express our deep concern at the long delay in the publication of the European Commission Recommendation on the prevention of harmful practices against women and girls. We urge the current Commission to adopt the Recommendation swiftly or guarantee its adoption by the next Commission before 2025, in line with the clear commitments made under the Gender Equality Strategy and the LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025.

We strongly support the adoption of this Recommendation, which will provide effective guidance for Member States on ways to address various harmful practices, including those committed to in the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025¹ and in the LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025². Furthermore, we call on the Commission to ensure all forms of obstetric and gynaecological violence, mistreatment and abuse are included in this Recommendation.

We call upon the European Commission to uphold its important commitment to assisting Member States in addressing harmful practices within the EU. The Recommendation will serve to complement the recently adopted Directive on Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, by making more detailed recommendations to Member States on actions to comprehensively tackle all forms of harmful practices. The adoption of the Recommendation is key to ensuring the provisions pertaining to harmful practices contained in the Directive, such as female genital mutilation (FGM), are implemented in line with best practices and that gaps in the legal framework regarding practices such as intersex genital mutilation and obstetric and gynaecological violence are addressed. Many of us have actively participated in the consultation process for the drafting of this Recommendation, including by providing extensive input regarding these harmful practices as well as best practices to address them comprehensively, and the existing international human rights and public health standards.

Obstetric and Gynaecological Violence

We urge the European Commission to ensure the Recommendation includes guidance to Member States on how to address [practices of obstetric and gynaecological violence](#). This term encompasses instances of violence, abuse, mistreatment, and neglect experienced throughout the sexual and reproductive life cycle — including during pregnancy, childbirth, the

¹ female genital mutilation, child early forced marriage, honour related crimes and forced abortion, forced sterilisation

² intersex genital mutilation, forced medicalisation of trans people, and conversion practices targeting LGBTIQ people

postpartum period, and in the context of obstetric, gynaecological and abortion care. International and regional human rights bodies, including the United Nations, the Council of Europe as well as the European Parliament have all recognised these practices as forms of gender-based and institutional violence and grave violations of women's human rights, and called for actions to address them.

Recent authoritative independent EU-wide studies commissioned by the [European Commission](#) and the [European Parliament](#) clearly demonstrate that practices of obstetric and gynaecological violence are widespread across the EU. These studies also document the severe and grave harm of these practices on women's physical and mental health, including post-partum depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. They clearly show the critical role the European Commission can play in providing guidance to Member States to address these harmful practices. It is also crucial that the European Commission supports voices from healthcare professionals, who have spoken out against such violence and initiated efforts to foster positive change to end harmful practices.

Intersex Genital Mutilation

Furthermore, we urge the Commission to hold fast to its commitment to include the issue of 'non-vital surgery and medical intervention on intersex infants and adolescents without their personal and fully informed consent (intersex genital mutilation)' as set out in the LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025.

The [European Parliament](#) had already taken a clear and strong position on the criminalisation of intersex genital mutilation as a form of gender-based violence and as a harmful practice and called on Member States to ban the practice. Intersex genital mutilation is a serious form of violence which includes medical, surgical or hormonal interventions carried out without the person's prior fully informed consent that have lifelong negative consequences for the person's health. It is a [form of gender-based violence](#), as it relies on harmful gender stereotypes linked to women's bodies and sexuality.

Filling a critical gap

Under your leadership, the European Commission has made significant strides in combating gender-based violence. We urge you to continue to fill a critical gap in protecting women from violence by adopting this Recommendation and outlining comprehensive measures to tackle obstetric and gynaecological violence and intersex genital mutilation, alongside other harmful practices.

We strongly believe this would make a substantial contribution towards protecting women and girls in all their diversity from all forms of harm in the EU. This would also send a clear signal that achieving concrete progress on gender equality remains a high priority for the European Commission in the next five years.

We remain available to support the European Commission in its continued effort to ensure that Member States effectively and fully address all forms of gender-based violence, and we thank you for your attention to this urgent matter.

Yours sincerely,

List of signatories

European civil society organisations and networks:

Center for Reproductive Rights
End FGM European Network (End FGM EU)
European Women's Lobby
ILGA-Europe
International Planned Parenthood Federation European Network (IPPF EN)
OII Europe - Organisation Intersex International Europe e.V.

National civil society organisations:

ActionAid International Italia ETS (Italy)
ActionAid Sweden (Sweden)
Aidos - Italian Association for Women in Development (Italy)
AkiDwA - Migrants Women Network (Ireland)
Amref Health Africa (Italy)
Austrian Family Planning Association (ÖGF) (Austria)
Caminar Intersex (Spain)
Center for Education, Counseling and Research – CESI (Croatia)
Centre for Gender Rights and Equality DIOTIMA (Greece)
Chilean Observatory of Obstetric Violence (Chile)
Collectif Interassociatif Autour de la Naissance (France)
Danish Family Planning Association (Denmark)
ECPI - Euroregional Center for Public Initiative (Romania)
EMMA (Hungary)
Fédération Laïque de Centres de Planning Familial - FLCPF (Belgium)
Foundation for Women and Family Planning FEDERA (Poland)
Foundation For Women's Health Research and Development (FORWARD) (UK)
FSAN - Federation of the Somali Associations in the Netherlands (Netherlands)
Fundacja Interakcja (Poland)
GAMS Belgium (Belgium)
Institute 8th of March (Slovenia)
InterAction Suisse - Association Suisse par et pour les personnes intersexes (Switzerland)
INTERSEX BELGIUM (Belgium)
INTERSEX ESISTE (Italy)
INTERSEX GREECE (Greece)
Intersex Iceland (Iceland)
Intersex Ireland (Ireland)
Inter Solidarity Turkey (Turkey)
Irish Family Planning Association (Ireland)
ISIO - Intersex Human Rights (Finland)
kolekTIRV (Croatia)
Mother Hood e.V. (Germany)
NNID, Netherlands organisation for sex diversity (Netherlands)
Nőkért Egyesület / Association for Women (Hungary)
Parents in Action – RODA (Croatia)
Pariter (Croatia)
Plateforme citoyenne pour une Naissance Respectée (Belgium)
Pro familia Bundesverband (Germany)

Rutgers (Netherlands)
Sensoa (Belgium)
The Society for Education on Contraception and Sexuality (Romania)
Verein Intergeschlechtlicher Menschen Österreich - VIMÖ / OII Austria (Austria)
Women of Grace (UK)
Women's Council Denmark (Denmark)
XY Spectrum (Serbia)

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Dr. Isabelle Bomboir, Médecin Généraliste, CHU Saint Pierre (Belgium)
Dr. Stephen O'Brien, General Practitioner (Ireland)
Hélène Sinan, Midwife and MSc Candidate in Global Maternal Health (Belgium)
Marie Laurent, Midwife (Belgium)
Rodante van der Waal, Independent Midwife, PhD-candidate in Care Ethics, University for Humanistic Studies (Netherlands)
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