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Cc: Marie Colline Leroy, State Secretary for Gender Equality
Frank Vandembroucke, Minister of Social Affairs and Public Health
Hadja Lahbib, Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Affairs
Karine Lalieux, Minister of Pensions and Social Integration, Combatting Poverty
Nicole de Moor, State Secretary for Asylum and Migration

Brussels, 21 February 2024

Re: Recommendations to the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union

Dear Mr. Ambassador,

I am writing to you after having read your Presidency programme and priorities.

FGM & THE EUROPEAN UNION

FGM is a violation of the **human rights** of women and girls affected by the practice and amounts to **torture**. The European Parliament estimated that over **600,000 survivors** of FGM currently live in Europe, and that **190,000 are at risk** of FGM in 17 countries alone.

The End FGM European Network (End FGM EU) is a European umbrella organisation consisting of 39 national NGO experts on female genital mutilation (FGM), in 16 European countries, including Belgium. End FGM EU operates as a meeting ground for communities, civil society organisations, decision-makers and other relevant actors at European level to interact, cooperate and join forces to end all forms of FGM in Europe and beyond. Grassroots voices are at the heart of the work we do to influence European governments and policymakers to act towards the elimination of FGM. We build our members' capacity, offer spaces to share expertise and develop partnerships. While dedicated to being the driving force of the European movement to end FGM, we are equally committed to building bridges and cooperating with all relevant actors in the field of FGM both in Europe and globally. In this sense, we actively promote and foster cooperation between the European movement and movements in other regions of the world.

We welcome the Belgian Presidency, which is part of the Trio formed with Spain and Hungary. The Trio programme is set to strengthen the area of freedom, security and justice in its internal and external dimensions in accordance with EU values and respecting **EU fundamental rights**. We deem it important to focus on human rights, which must include preventing and eliminating FGM, a human, women's and child's rights violation. We are also glad to see that, as part of the Trio programme, Belgium is committed to working towards the reform of the Common European Asylum

System and the Pact on Migration and Asylum, with a special focus placed on combating violence against women and gender-based violence. We insist on the need for a **human rights-based gender-, age- and culturally sensitive Common European Asylum System**, being respectful and providing **special protection measures to FGM-affected women or girls at risk of FGM seeking asylum**. The Trio programme also emphasizes Europe's key **social and health dimensions to foster inclusion and non-discrimination** within a fairer Europe. Health services and support services are fundamental to ensure FGM and GBV Survivors are protected and supported: they should be widely available, multidisciplinary and inclusive. These aspects are crucial to the elimination of FGM, towards which we promote an intersectional perspective, key to combat gender inequalities that result from several overlapping forms of discrimination and need to be considered and tackled together. Finally, we welcome the Trio programme's focus on the mid-term review of **the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027** and encourage increasing resources towards ending gender-based violence and promoting sexual and reproductive health and rights to match the actual needs of the sector.

Concerning the Belgian Presidency programme, we welcome the commitment to tackling gender-based violence and violence disproportionality affecting women. However, recent reports indicate that we are heavily off track in achieving SDGs goals, especially SDG 5.¹ This worrying trend signifies that gender inequality remains imbedded in our society and an acceleration and renewed commitment of efforts is needed to ensure meaningful change can be achieved. The recent accession of the Union to the Istanbul Convention, is a welcomed step which has paved the path toward protecting women and supporting victims. The Presidency should continue this momentum of achieving gender equality by ensuring the full implementation of the Convention and by progressing the legislative files which seek to combat gender-based violence. It is important that the Presidency prioritise gender equality and the fight against gender-based stereotypes, in both external but internal actions of the Union and effectively implements the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025. Based on the core values of the EU, the afore-mentioned commitments and the Council Conclusions *"Preventing and combating all forms of violence against women and girls, including female genital mutilation"* of June 2014, End FGM EU calls on the Presidency and the Council to:

1. **Prompt all Member States to seriously address Gender-Based Violence, with a focus on prevention and protection.**
 - **Urge all Member States to ratify the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention (IC) and call on all Parties to ensure its full implementation.** This key treaty should remain the main reference for EU policy on the matter of violence against women and girls and a fundamental pillar to promote equal opportunities in Europe.
 - **Finalise the recently agreed Directive on Combatting Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence and urge Member States to ensure full and effective national implementation, which goes beyond the minimal provisions.** While we welcome the adoption of this instrument, it is disappointing to see that the agreed text contains many shortcomings². We urge the Presidency to encourage Member States to remedy the gaps in the legislative framework when transposing the directive. This instrument should be used as a complementary tool to protect victims of gender-based violence across the EU and **serve effectively the actual needs of all survivors of GBV in the EU as well as increase protection and prevention measures**. An EU Coordinator should be appointed to oversee its implementation in addition to the accountability mechanism to monitor Member States' compliance. In order to efficiently tackle FGM, we

¹ See [The Gender Snapshot 2023](#).

² See our [Joint Position](#) and [Open Letter](#).

insist that the EU, including through this Directive, must do more to increase measures on the **prevention** of gender-based violence and the **provision of specialised holistic support services to all Survivors**.

- Work with the European Commission and Member States to **ensure the revision and effective transposition and implementation of Directive 2012/29/EU (Victims' Rights Directive) in all EU Member States**. We highlight that FGM Survivors and people at risk of undergoing FGM are part of the continuum of gender-based violence that permeates all societies, and these tools are key for their protection: the Victim's Rights Directive is also among these key tools, and we encourage Belgium to ensure that it is rightly implemented in all Member States.
- **Prioritise access and enjoyment of full sexual and reproductive as well as mental health rights, with a holistic approach** to SRHR services, that includes mental health support, especially for Survivors of gender-based violence, who can suffer serious mental health consequences, in line with the European Commission's proposal for a **comprehensive mental health strategy** and the recommendations put forward by the European Parliament.
- Prevent through the promotion of non-discrimination and gender-mainstreaming: a Europe free from discrimination and racism should be not only a vision but a reality. All actions promoting this vision should incorporate **an intersectional approach to tackle the enduring issues of racism, xenophobia and islamophobia**, all of which negatively affect the mission of ending female genital mutilation, reinforcing stereotypes and the marginalisation of affected communities.
- Collaborate with the Member States and the **European Commission to promote the implementation of the soon-to-be-adopted Recommendation on how to effectively prevent and combat harmful practices**, which should be used as an additional tool to harmonically achieve higher minimum standards of GBV prevention, protection and support.

2. **Grant international protection to survivors and people at risk of gender-based violence such as FGM.**

In light of the recent agreement reached on the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, we are concerned with the human rights implications which the current package will have in practice. Lengthy and complex procedures and the expanded use of border protection serve to reduce protection standards, increase the risk of detention and make access to the asylum process harder.³ Consequently, this will limit the number of people granted protection in the European Union. It is fundamental that all migration and asylum policies take into consideration the **human rights of people on the move**, in particular girls and women, and their right to receive international protection when affected or at risk of being affected by FGM in the countries they are fleeing. **The rights of asylum seekers on the grounds of FGM** should be guaranteed across all Member States to ensure the full protection and support of both survivors of FGM and people at risk of undergoing it. Although the Pact has been adopted with limitations which we condemn, going forward, we urge the Presidency to ensure that its implementation and interpretation is carried out in full compliance with European and international law and fundamental rights standards. This requirement is in line with commitments to uphold the Charter of Fundamental Rights and to strive for EU accession to the European Convention on Human Rights.

³ See [ECRE Editorial](#).

3. **Increase and improve data collection.**

The Presidency should lead efforts to **establish a common data collection methodology** on the prevalence of gender-based violence in each Member State, including on FGM and on refugee status granted on grounds of GBV and FGM within the asylum system. As various editions of Gender Equality Index⁴ have highlighted, the data assessing the prevalence of violence against women is scarce, outdated and fails to reflect the full extent of the situation.

4. **Act decisively towards the achievement of 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.**

We call on the Presidency to work with other MS, EU institutions and stakeholders towards the realisation of the 2030 Agenda. As the 2023 Progress Report has highlighted, we are heavily off track in reaching SDG goals and an additional 360 billion per year is needed to achieve gender equality.⁵ There is a need to increase investments specifically targeted at SDG 5.3 if we want to achieve this goal in the few remaining years. We call on **increasing resources** available for cross-regional cooperation and to explore **innovative financing mechanisms** that make optimal use of all donor and donation opportunities to support the anti-FGM sector, particularly grassroots organisations.

5. **Increase civil society and community engagement.**

Civil society organisations and particularly community-based and grassroots organisations are the key to the solution. By effectively supporting and working collaboratively with civil society, community-led and youth-led organisations the EU can enhance its chances of reaching the commitments made. We call on the Presidency to ensure that CSOs be increasingly supported and involved in relevant decision making through better funding and community engagement mechanisms across the EU.

Finally, our Members have expressed their concern regarding the upcoming Belgian general elections and the European elections. Women's rights and gender equality are facing a universal backlash and extreme discourses have been normalized, targeting SRHR, LGBTIQ+ people, victims of gender-based and domestic violence, etc. In the face of the many crises it has to deal with, **we urge the Belgian Presidency to maintain human rights at the core of its action for an increasingly credible role of the EU as a global leader by example** and for guaranteeing and securing women's rights.

Wishing the Belgian Government, a fruitful and constructive Presidency Semester, we reiterate our readiness to support you and cooperate closely to achieve our common goals.

Yours sincerely,



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⁴ For example, see [Gender Equality Index 2023](#) at page 62. See also [Gender Equality Index 2022](#) at page 55.

⁵ See the [Gender Snapshot 2023](#) at page 13