

Policy Paper



Modernising the EU Directive on Midwifery

Purpose

This paper aims to present a clear position on the ongoing update process for the EU Directive on Professional Qualifications relating to midwifery ([Directive 2005/36/EC](#)). It advocates for a comprehensive, evidence-based revision that reflects modern scientific, educational, and professional advancements, aligns with global standards, supports midwifery autonomy, and promotes freedom of movement within the EU/EEA.

Position

The current revision process for the EU Directive on Professional Qualifications – Midwife must move beyond a technical, minimal-update approach to adopt a transparent, inclusive, and scientifically rigorous methodology. It must align the Directive's education and scope-of-practice standards with internationally recognised benchmarks, notably the International Confederation of Midwives (ICM) [Essential Competencies for Midwifery Practice](#) and [Global Standards for Education and Regulation](#), to empower midwives, enhance professional mobility, and promote equitable, high-quality sexual, reproductive, maternal, newborn, and adolescent health (SRMNAH) services throughout Europe.

Key Points

- The Directive sections under revision are outdated, and fail to reflect scientific advances in midwifery practice and education;
- The current update methodology is flawed, lacking cultural adaptation, transparency and inclusivity, risking biased or incomplete recommendations;
- Many EU/EEA countries treat the Directive as a maximum standard rather than a minimum, limiting midwives' freedom of movement across EU Member States;
- Alignment with Global Standards such as those by ICM, WHO and others is critical to harmonise education and practice across Europe and support European leadership in the midwifery sector;
- The Directive update has broader implications for gender equality, health system resilience, and economic development across the EU.



Discussion

The Directive on Professional Qualifications (Directive 2005/36/EC), last updated in 2013, aims to harmonise minimum education and practice standards across the EU/EEA to facilitate mutual recognition of professional qualifications and enable workforce mobility. Midwifery, as a key profession in sexual, reproductive, maternal, newborn and adolescent health (SRMNAH), is crucial to achieving EU health, gender equity, and sustainable development goals. However, the current Directive's provisions on midwifery education and scope of practice lag behind global best practices and scientific evidence, failing to adequately reflect midwives' evolving roles and competencies.

The ongoing talks on a potential update process, led by DG-EMPL, represent a rare and urgent opportunity to modernise these standards. Unfortunately, the process exhibits significant methodological shortcomings, including reliance on unvalidated questionnaires available only in English, exclusion of advancements that are not reported by at least 18 countries, and limited transparency and stakeholder engagement. These limitations risk perpetuating disparities between countries where the Directive is interpreted as a ceiling rather than a floor for standards.

Professional bodies such as the [International Confederation of Midwives](#) (ICM), the [European Midwives' Association](#) (EMA), and the [European Forum of National Nursing and Midwifery Associations](#) (EFNNMA) have collaborated to provide coordinated feedback emphasising the need for alignment with globally recognised standards. This coordinated feedback based on the ICM Global Standards enables midwives to safely and effectively provide over 90% of SRMNAH care needs, reduce maternal and neonatal mortality and morbidity, and enhance health system efficiency and resilience.

Moreover, midwifery remains a predominantly female profession facing intersectional challenges including gender bias, undervaluation, and professional competition. Adopting a gender-transformative lens in modernising the Directive is essential to empower midwives, promote women's economic empowerment, and improve health outcomes, consistent with the EU's commitments to gender equality and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Alternative Viewpoints

Some stakeholders argue that the update process should remain a purely technical “tick the box” exercise, limiting changes to minor adjustments without aligning with scientific evidence or ICM Global Standards, to avoid complexity.



Rebuttal of Alternative Viewpoints

While respecting Member States' primary role in healthcare, the Directive's core purpose is to set minimum harmonised standards for midwifery education and practice. These standards ensure quality, facilitate workforce mobility, and support professional recognition across the EU/EEA. Failure to update the Directive in accordance with scientific evidence and ICM Global Standards risks sustaining fragmentation and inconsistencies, which hinder midwives' free movement and professional progression. Educational programmes in many countries are already using the ICM Global Standards as a benchmark.

Ignoring alignment with Global Standards undermines the EU's commitment to evidence-based policy, gender equality, health workforce resilience, and patient safety. Reiterating only minor technical updates – as suggested by SPARK Policy Consulting – would reduce the EU's global competitiveness by leaving midwifery education stagnant while other countries advance. It would also widen gaps in education quality and midwifery autonomy that negatively affect care standards and workforce sustainability across the EU/EEA. Finally, it is a poor use of taxpayer resources, which should be used to improve and align the Directive with accepted Global Standards.

Solution

We call on EU policymakers to prioritise a comprehensive update of the Directive that:

- Aligns midwifery education and practice standards with the latest scientific evidence and ICM Global Standards;
- Is clearly written, unambiguous, and easy to implement;
- Ensures the EU maintains its competitive advantage as a global leader in midwifery;
- Provides good value for taxpayer money invested in the update study.

Such an update would strengthen workforce mobility, improve quality and safety of care, and advance the EU's goals on gender equality, public health, and sustainable development.

SUGGESTED TEXT FOR THE UPDATED EU DIRECTIVE

Academic papers published on this topic

Brigante, Drandic and Maimburg. [Updating the European Union's Midwifery Directive to advance women's sexual and reproductive health in the future](#). DOI: 10.1016/j.srhc.2025.101138.