

## NEWS IN BRIEF ON COVID-19 & SRHR IN EUROPE

3rd Edition: 4 May – 8 June 2020

This bulletin provides links and a brief overview of recent media coverage and developments regarding sexual and reproductive health and rights in Europe in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It may not provide a comprehensive overview of all the sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) issues that have been impacted by the pandemic as it does not reference every development.

This is the 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition of the Bulletin. A [1<sup>st</sup> Edition](#) covering news between 20 March – 9 April 2020 was published on 9 April 2020 and a [2<sup>nd</sup> Edition](#) covering news from 10 April – 3 May 2020 was published on 4 May 2020.

The COVID-19 public health crisis is impacting sexual and reproductive health and rights across Europe. In particular, the harm caused by pre-existing medically unnecessary legal and policy barriers in access to sexual and reproductive health services has been exacerbated in the pandemic context, while some governments have sought to take advantage of the crisis to restrict SRHR.

### COUNTRY NEWS

#### BELGIUM

**Abortion:** The parliamentary debate on proposed legislation seeking to improve access to abortion care in Belgium has been put on hold until June at the earliest due to the COVID-19 pandemic. [\[Sudinfo\]](#) The draft law, which was introduced in 2019, seeks to fully decriminalize abortion, extend the time limit for abortion on request from 12 to 18 weeks of pregnancy, reduce the mandatory waiting period from 6 days to 48 hours, and to introduce penalties for obstructing women's access to abortion services. [\[La Libre\]](#) [\[The Brussels Times\]](#)

#### CROATIA

**Maternal Health:** An internal investigation has reportedly been launched after a woman who miscarried was refused care by a hospital in Zagreb on the basis that she had not been tested for COVID-19 after returning from Germany. The hospital allegedly acted against government recommendations. [\[indexhr\]](#)

#### FRANCE

**Abortion:** The French government continues to be called upon to ensure access to abortion care by extending the time limit for abortion on request from 12 to 14 weeks of pregnancy, following reports that some women have been unable to access care within the 12-week limit during the confinement. On 28 May, the Senate rejected a temporary extension of the time limit. [\[Le Point\]](#) [\[Le Public Sénat\]](#)

In addition, a judge has reportedly rejected a petition by anti-abortion groups to suspend the decree of the Minister of Health issued in April which allows the use of telemedicine and self-managed abortion at home during the pandemic up to 9 weeks of pregnancy LMP. [\[Le Conseil d'État\]](#)[\[ICWRS Newsletter\]](#)

## GERMANY

**Abortion:** There are ongoing reports about increasing challenges in access to abortion care in Germany, including long waiting times for abortions in some regions due to medical restrictions related to the pandemic and the lack of abortion care providers. Reports indicate that the Family Committee of the German Parliament has rejected a motion proposing to waive the mandatory counseling requirement prior to abortion and to recognize abortion care as emergency health care, during the pandemic. [[Die Tagespost](#)] [[taz](#)]

## HUNGARY

**Legal gender recognition:** Hungary's parliament approved legislation banning the legal recognition of transgender and intersex people, by prohibiting them from legally changing their gender. The legislation, which was signed into law by the Hungarian President at the end of May, has been widely criticized by human rights organizations, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, and Members of the European Parliament. [[Merce](#)] [[Euro News](#)] [[The Guardian](#)]

## ITALY

**Abortion:** There are ongoing reports that women have experienced increasing challenges in access to abortion care in Italy during the pandemic, including as a result of increasing refusals of care by health providers, and the lack of accessible information on healthcare facilities that are providing abortions. Medical associations and civil society continue to call on the Ministry of Health to ensure access to abortion care during the pandemic, including by allowing telemedicine and early medical abortion at home. [[il Fatto Quotidiano](#)]

## MALTA

**Abortion:** There are reports that Facebook ads selling fake abortion pills have appeared in Malta following the introduction of COVID-19 travel restrictions that have had the effect of preventing women from seeking legal abortion care outside of Malta. [[maltatoday](#)]

## ROMANIA

**Abortion:** Reports indicate that following calls on the Government by Romanian civil society organizations to ensure access to abortion care during the pandemic, the Ministry of Health issued a circular to all District Health Authorities, recommending the inclusion of abortion among emergency services being provided during the pandemic. However, only some hospitals and clinics have resumed services for abortion on request. [[CW RSA Newsletter](#)] [[Libertatea](#)]

**Maternal Health:** It has been reported that women in Romanian maternity hospitals continue to be separated from newborn babies and are not allowed companions or visits in hospitals. [[Open Democracy](#)]

## SLOVAKIA

**Abortion:** A number of members of parliament have announced their intention to propose legislation to restrict access to abortion on request, currently permitted in Slovakia up to 12 weeks of pregnancy. [[aktuality.sk](#)] [[Pravda](#)]

## SPAIN

**Abortion:** The Spanish Supreme Court has reportedly denied a request by the Christian Lawyers Association to suspend abortion services during the state of emergency. The Association challenged a

governmental order published in April which recognized abortion care as essential health care during the COVID-19 health crisis. [[europa press](#)]

## UNITED KINGDOM

**Abortion:** An organization called Christian Concern lost a legal challenge in the High Court against the Department for Health and Social Care over its decision to allow women to have early medical abortions at home following teleconsultation during the pandemic. [[Metro](#)]

In addition, a cross-party group of UK parliamentarians have introduced a bill that seeks to ban abortion on grounds of fetal impairments such as cleft lip, cleft palate and club foot. [[The Guardian](#)] [[Refinery29](#)]

**Contraception:** News reports indicate that as several sexual and reproductive health clinics have closed down or have been operating with very limited services during the lockdown, some women are turning to contraception from unregulated and unverified online sources. As a result, the Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists has published a comprehensive guide for women seeking contraception, abortion and other sexual and reproductive healthcare during the pandemic. [[Independent](#)]

**Period poverty:** A recent survey conducted by Plan International UK found that three in ten girls aged between 14 and 21 have been struggling to afford or access period products during lockdown. [[Independent](#)]

## Northern Ireland

**Abortion:** New abortion regulations that went into effect at the end of March have legalised abortion on request in Northern Ireland. On 2 June, the Northern Ireland Assembly narrowly passed a motion brought by the DUP to reject the new regulations. While the vote has no legal effect and does not impact the regulations, the DUP, which is anti-abortion, said it would send a message to Westminster that the regulations are not supported by Stormont. [[BBC](#)]

## UKRAINE

**Surrogacy:** There are reports that around one hundred babies born as part of surrogacy arrangements in Ukraine have been unable to be collected by their parents who are based in another country due to global travel restrictions resulting from the pandemic. [[CNN](#)][[Reuters](#)]

## REGIONAL NEWS

For more information on regional developments see: ASTRA Network CEE Bulletin on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights [[Bulletin](#)]

Civil society organizations across Europe have warned that the COVID-19 pandemic is pushing back progress on maternity care as some European countries reportedly continue to ignore WHO guidance for maternal health during the crisis. [[The Guardian](#)]

On 6 May, 37 European governments issued a joint press statement together with 22 governments from other regions on Protecting Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights and Promoting Gender-responsiveness in the COVID-19 crisis. [[Press Statement](#)]

### COUNCIL OF EUROPE

*Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights:* COVID-19: Ensure women's access to sexual and reproductive health and rights [[Statement](#)]; Pandemic and Human Rights [[Statements](#)]

Council of Europe's information page on initiatives, practices, statements and guidelines on women's rights and the COVID-19 pandemic. The page contains information on action undertaken by Council of Europe member states, on the Council of Europe institutional response, and on the initiatives by other international organizations and by civil society. [[Dedicated Resource Page](#)]

### EUROPEAN UNION

*Council of the European Union:* Declaration by the High Representative Josep Borrell, on behalf of the European Union, on human rights in the times of the coronavirus pandemic [[Declaration](#)]; "Team Europe" global response to COVID-19: Council welcomes the mobilisation of almost €36 billion and approves conclusions [[Press Release](#)]

*European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights:* Coronavirus pandemic in the EU - Fundamental Rights Implications - Bulletin 2 [[Report](#)]

Human Rights and Democracy Network's information page with resources from HRDN members, partners and international organizations to help guide crisis responses, monitor, inform and assess the impact of Covid-19 [[Dedicated Resource Page](#)]

### UNITED NATIONS

*Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights:* Covid-19 Guidance [[Guidance](#)]

*UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs:* Leaving no one behind: the COVID-19 crisis through the disability and gender lens [[Policy Brief](#)]

*Inter-Agency Working Group on Reproductive Health in Crises:* COVID-19 Pandemic Further Threatens Women and Girls Already at Risk in Humanitarian and Fragile Settings [[Advocacy Statement](#)]

*World Health Organization:* Maintaining essential health services: operational guidance for the COVID-19 context [[Interim Guidance](#)]; Gender and COVID-19 [[Advocacy Brief](#)]

*World Health Assembly:* COVID-19 response [[Resolution](#)]