

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

20 March – 9 April 2020

This bulletin provides links and a brief overview of recent media coverage regarding access to sexual and reproductive health care in Europe in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is not intended to provide a comprehensive overview of the SRHR issues that have been impacted by the pandemic and the related measures adopted by the European governments to stem the pandemic.

### COUNTRY NEWS

#### CZECH REPUBLIC

**Maternal health:** There are reports that the Czech Ministry of Health has temporarily banned the presence of a companion during facility-based childbirth due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A few exemptions to the ban apply. [[iROZHLAS](#)] [[Denik N](#)]

#### DENMARK

**Assisted reproduction:** There are reports that Denmark's public and private fertility clinics are closing down to avoid propagating COVID-19 infections and to allow health professionals to assist in other parts of the country's health care system. [[DR](#)]

#### FRANCE

**Abortion:** In a joint statement published on 3 April by the Minister of Health and the State Secretary for Gender Equality, new guidelines were released stating that consultations for abortion care can take place via phone or internet, and where women wish to and it is medically approved they may take both medical abortion pills at home. [[Press Release From French Government](#)]

In addition, the French Government has been called upon to adopt additional emergency measures to ensure access to abortion care during the pandemic period, including temporarily extending the legal time limit for abortion on request. [[France 24](#)] [[Au féminin](#)]

**Assisted reproduction:** Reports indicate that the French Agency of Biomedicine issued guidance on medically assisted reproduction procedures during the COVID-19 pandemic, recommending that some treatments be suspended until the pandemic is over. [[Santé Magazine](#)]

**Maternal health:** News reports indicate that a growing number of hospitals in France and other countries are prohibiting a birth companion from attending childbirth during the pandemic, while women suspected of being infected with COVID-19 are being separated from newborn babies. [[Euronews](#)]

#### GERMANY

**Abortion:** Mandatory pre-abortion counselling is now available online and via telephone for the period of the pandemic. There are calls on German authorities to ensure that abortion care is provided as an

essential health service and to permit early medical abortion pills to be taken at home with support via telemedicine. [\[Taz\]](#) [\[Taz\]](#) [\[SAT.1 Regional\]](#)

## IRELAND

**Abortion:** The Irish Government has made provision for remote consultations prior to abortion and self-administration at home of early medical abortion pills during the COVID-19 pandemic. [\[IMT\]](#) [\[IFPA\]](#)

## ITALY

**Abortion:** There are reports that access to legal abortion care, which was already very limited in Italy before the COVID-19 pandemic, has become even more difficult as increasing numbers of hospitals across the country have stopped providing abortion care during the pandemic. The Ministry of Health is being called on to ensure access to abortion during the pandemic including by allowing early medical abortion pills to be taken at home and granting access to telemedicine. [\[la Repubblica\]](#) [\[openDemocracy\]](#)

**Maternal care:** Italian authorities have been called on to ensure respectful maternity care during the COVID-19 pandemic. [\[TerraNuova\]](#)

## NETHERLANDS

**Abortion:** The Dutch Ministry of Health has been called on to temporarily relax the Netherlands' abortion law during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to allow individuals to take early medical abortion pills at home and to receive support via telemedicine. [\[Zembla\]](#) [\[DutchNews\]](#)

## POLAND

**Abortion:** There are reports that women seeking abortion care in Poland are increasingly concerned about their ability to access care via shipments of medical abortion pills or by travelling to other European countries following the Polish government's border closures. [\[Reuters\]](#)

In addition, on 15-16 April the Poland's Parliament will debate two legislative proposals that purport to severely limit access to abortion care and criminalize the provision of sexuality education. [\[tvn24\]](#)

**Maternal health:** The Polish Minister of Health and national medical consultants have been called upon to allow a birth companion at facility-based childbirth following restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic. [\[Gazeta Wyborcza\]](#)

## SLOVAKIA

**Abortion:** An Anti-abortion organization has called on the Slovak Minister of Health to stop the provision of abortion on request during the COVID-19 pandemic. [\[CBR Europe\]](#)

**Maternal health:** There are reports that several hospitals in Slovakia are not allowing birth companions during the COVID-19 pandemic, while others are separating newborn babies from their mothers or applying other practices in conflict with WHO guidance. The Ombudsperson has urged the Minister of Health to address the situation and ensure provision of care during childbirth in line with evidence-based standards. [\[Pravda\]](#)

## SPAIN

**Abortion:** Reports indicate that the Spanish authorities have deemed legal abortion to be among those health services that should not be postponed since it is time sensitive. [\[El Espanol\]](#) To minimize a risk of COVID-19 infection, the Spanish Ministry of Health has been called on to reduce the number of visits required to access abortion care and enable use of early medical abortion at home. [\[Público\]](#)

## UNITED KINGDOM

**Abortion:** Measures have been adopted to allow women undergoing early medical abortion in England, Scotland and Wales to take both medical abortion pills at home following a telephone or electronic medical consultation. [\[BBC News\]](#) [\[The Guardian\]](#) [\[RCOG\]](#)

Although new abortion laws came into force in Northern Ireland allowing abortion on request in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy and thereafter in specific circumstances, there are reports that women are unable to safely access care in Northern Ireland and instead are being told to travel to England for care, despite the pandemic and attendant risks to their health and wellbeing. Reports also indicate that the Belfast and Northern Trusts agreed a way of temporarily providing the services to women but have been instructed by the Department of Health not to proceed with their plans, pending the issue being discussed by the Northern Ireland Executive. There are calls for the Department of Health to enable women to undergo early medical abortion at home in line with similar measures introduced in the rest of the UK. [\[BBC News\]](#) [\[Reuters\]](#) [\[The Irish News\]](#)

**Assisted reproduction:** There are reports that the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority in the UK has requested all clinics to end IVF treatments by 15 April, except in exceptional cases, such as when a woman wants to freeze her eggs before undergoing chemotherapy. [\[iTV News\]](#)

**Contraception:** Reports indicate that many people who are in the course of scheduled contraceptive injections, as well as those who need to have their implants and IUDs (intrauterine devices) replaced, are now being told they must wait. [\[Edinburgh Evening News\]](#)

**Maternal health:** There are reports that several local maternity units had been closed, while homebirth services have been withdrawn or restricted in more than a third of areas. Experts have warned that community-based options should be available to pregnant women wishing to avoid hospitals treating people infected with COVID-19. [\[The Guardian\]](#)

## STATEMENTS BY UN AND EUROPEAN HUMAN RIGHTS MECHANISMS ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Statement by the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović: We must respect human rights and stand united against the coronavirus pandemic [\[Statement\]](#)

Statement by the President of GREVIO, Marceline Naudi, on the need to uphold the standards of the Istanbul Convention in times of a pandemic [\[Statement\]](#)

UN Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council have taken various initiatives in relation to COVID-19 to underline the importance of safeguarding human rights while taking measures to address the crisis [\[Press statements\]](#)