May & June 2020
NEWSLETTER in NUMBERS

83 MPs sign call to action as Romanian Senate moves to ban gender and sexuality education
9 MEPs for SRR join event on anti-gender awareness raising and safeguarding SRHR
59 governments release joint statement on protecting SRHR in the COVID-19 crisis

In the news

EPF NEWS

EPF publishes new anti-gender research on ultra-conservative, Catholic-inspired influence network

BRUSSELS - As a follow-up to EPF’s report on "Restoring the Natural Order": The religious extremists’ vision to mobilize European societies against human rights on sexuality and reproduction, EPF has today published a report entitled "Modern day Crusaders in Europe."
Three recent events affecting human rights in sexuality and reproduction (a proposed ban on abortion in Poland, blocking support for She Decides in Croatia and halting a civil union law in Estonia) were spearheaded by organisations which appear to be the national antennae of the transnational, socially conservative network called Tradition, Family and Property (TFP). TFP refers to a set of interrelated conservative, Catholic-inspired organisations which share a common world view inspired by the TFP founder, Plinio Corrêa de Oliveira. Originating in Brazil in 1960 and eventually spreading throughout the world, TFP has long been an insurrection movement within Catholicism, with a distinct way of working by fusing social conservatism with economic hyper-liberalism and a legacy of complicity with far-right movements.

Having withered away from Latin America, TFP is now an active European network with positions against sexual and reproductive rights (SRR) among its priorities. TFP’s influence on SRR takes three main routes: social mobilisation; norm entrepreneur and entering decision making spaces. TFP has found new horizons in Eastern Europe and has ambitions to influence the European Union and the United Nations. The reactionary narrative of TFP espousing religious orthodoxy and sanctifying economic inequality could become attractive to some by offering religious legitimisation for illiberalism and authoritarianism.

Read the report here

Over 80 parliamentarians across Europe sign call to action as Romanian Senate approves ban on gender and sexuality education

ONLINE - 83 Members of Parliaments from across Europe expressed their deep concern about latest developments in Romania in a signed letter to the Romanian President. The adoption of an explicit amendment to the National Education Law by the Romanian Senate on 16 June 2020 would prohibit information on gender identity in schools, universities and other educational spaces in particular “activities that spread the gender identity theory or opinion, understood as the theory or opinion that gender is a different concept from that of biological sex and that the two are not always the same”.

If enacted, gender studies and courses on women’s rights and equal opportunities at universities could be abolished, scientific literature defining and using the term gender could
be banned or confiscated, meaning that access to accurate and evidence-based knowledge and information would be blocked which is an infringement on the right to education and freedom of thought and expression. All teachers, school counselors, academics, doctors, social workers, non-governmental organisations and professional trainers would be banned from addressing topics related to gender and gender equality incl. on transgender persons. By banning conversations about the difference between gender and biological sex, Romania would make it challenging to address these topics in its sexuality education and act against the interests of its young people in general – and in particular against its LGBTQI+ community.

The letter reads:

"Romania would violate its anti-discrimination and gender equality legislation both of which are legal obligations as a member of the European Union. Discrimination against the country’s LGBTQI+ community would be legitimised. And furthermore, Romania would violate its obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) or the Istanbul Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence."

Finally, the parliamentarians addressed the Romanian President saying:

"We urge you to respect the fundamental human rights of all Romanians and ask you not to promulgate the Education Law no. 87/2020 with the amendment adopted by the Senate which bans any reference to gender identity in schools and universities, but to send it back to Parliament for re-examination."

Read the full letter here

MEPs for SRR hosts webinar on safeguarding women's rights, gender equality and SRHR

ONLINE - In recent years, a small but vocal group of actors pushed back against women’s rights, gender equality, LGBTQI+ rights and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). This pushback is often orchestrated by European and global networks who manage to infiltrate institutions and governments.

The MEPs for SRR webinar, "Women's rights, gender equality and SRHR at risk - coordinated counter-revolutionary attempts in Poland, at EU level and beyond" aimed to raise awareness among parliamentarians and provide background information on how organisations and networks like TFP or Agenda Europe and their partners operate. Be it in Poland, at EU level, at the Council of Europe, in other EU Member States, similar patterns emerge as these groups attempt to obstruct the realisation of people’s rights and countries’ development.

Our guest from Poland, Urszula Grycuk from the Federation for Women and Family Planning (Federa) presented Federa's latest report on the Polish ultra-conservative Christian-Catholic
legal think tank and political organisation Ordo Iuris and the EPF Secretary Neil Datta presented our new report on Tradition, Family and Property (TFP) – the network behind Ordo Iuris.

Moderated by MEPS for SRR co-chairs Hon. Sophie in ’t Veld, MEP and Hon. Petra De Sutter, MEP, the webinar then opened up for discussion between the participating parliamentarians who all recognised the need to join forces to recognise and prevent attempts by these religious fundamentalist movements, who often hijack human rights language as a means to go under the radar.

Agenda:
Introduction – MEPs for SRR co-chairs Hon. Petra De Sutter & Sophie in ’t Veld, MEPS
Urszula Grycuk (Federa) – presentation on Ordo Iuris
Comments by Klementyna Suchanow, journalist and author
Neil Datta (EPF) – presentation on Modern Day Crusaders (TFP)
Debate, comments and feedback by parliamentarians
Hon. Malin Björk, MEP, Sweden
Hon. Gwendoline Delbos-Corfield, MEP, France
Hon. Eglantina Gjermeni, MP, Albania
Senator Alice-Mary Higgins, Ireland
Hon. Baroness Doreen Massey, UK
Hon. Fred Matic, MEP, Croatia – video message
Hon. Vera Tax, MEP, Netherlands
Hon. Irène Tolleret, MEP, France
(Hon. Chrysoula Zacharopoulou, MEP, France)

Read EPF’s report on Tradition, Family and Property
Cultural and Religious Counterrevolution – Is Polish Law under the Threat of Ch...

UNFPA Executive Director encourages parliamentarians to continue delivering for women and girls

NEW YORK - UNFPA Executive Director Dr. Natalia Kanem addressed parliamentarians in a written letter thanking them for their engagement and participation in the Nairobi Summit on ICPD25 last November. She shared the recently released Report: Accelerating the Promise: The Report on the Nairobi Summit on ICPD25.
Thank you again for your leadership, partnership and championship of the lifesaving ICPD agenda. UNFPA looks forward to continuing our collaboration to deliver concrete results for women and girls and ensure that no one is left behind in the final push to 2030 and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

**Accelerating the Promise: The Report on the Nairobi Summit on ICPD25**

**Menstrual Hygiene Day 2020 calls for Affordable, Accessible, and Safe Products for Everyone**

GLOBAL – Today marks Menstrual Health (MH) Day – a campaign to draw attention to the continued difficulties people face in accessing safe menstrual health products, including taxation and pricing, but also availability in low resource settings.

The menstrual cycle accompanies girls and women from the beginning of puberty until menopause and is an important indicator of sexual and reproductive health. However, menstruation is more than a biological phenomenon, women and girls across the world continue to experience discrimination linked to their periods. A lack of comprehensive menstrual health education triggers the spread of misinformation and stigmatisation. In addition, many women face further struggles to afford expensive menstrual health products, which also often lack specific regulations and testing.

Celebrated since 2014, the international day strives to normalise menstruation and remove stigma and shame associated with menstruating – and has done so with considerable success. In recent years, periods have become less of a taboo and hashtags like #periodpoverty have been trending on social media, underscoring the persisting financial barriers to accessing menstrual health supplies. Contrary to common belief, these are not only native in low-resource countries, but are wide-spread in Europe: in the UK one in seven girls struggles to afford MH products and one in three has missed school because of it. In reaction, Scotland has taken the lead in progressive menstrual health policy by supplying school and university students with needed products. Globally, donors, governmental and non-governmental development organisations have also recognised the detrimental effects of period stigma on gender equality.
Along these lines, parliamentarians spoke up today highlighting the need to the impact of these challenges on women in poor and humanitarian settings.

Hon. Marie-Rose Nguini Effa, MP (Cameroon) wrote an article to mark the day, stating, "The menstrual hygiene problem weakens the health of young girls because most of the time they cannot afford sanitary products. A pack of sanitary towels costs 600 Francs CFA in Cameroon and for families this represents the daily ration of an entire family which makes the budget of sanitary items a non-priority purchase. Young girls use scraps of worn fabric from old sheets to protect themselves."

Hon. Esther Passaris, MP (Kenya) commemorated 28 May with a distribution of sanitary towels at Kibera Primary School in Nairobi. "Menstrual Hygiene is closely linked to the rights to healthcare, education, water, sanitation and hygiene. It ties into several SDGs physical health and psycho-social well-being, quality education, gender empowerment and equality. Leaders in every layer of decision making must ensure that all women and girls in Kenya are able to manage their menstruation hygienically, with dignity and without stigma. Making quality menstrual products & educational information on MHM accessible is our collective duty." - Hon. Esther Passaris, MP (Kenya)

Hon. Petra Bayr, MP (Austria) and SPÖ spokeswoman for global development raised her voice and reaffirmed commitment on the issue. "Monthly hygiene is particularly challenging in humanitarian settings. Refugee camps often have few toilets and limited access to running water. International aid organisations such as the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) provide assistance to enable girls and women to manage their menstrual period, safely and with dignity" notes Bayr and calls on the Austrian government to recognise the special needs of women and girls in refugee camps when allocating foreign disaster relief funds.

On this occasion EPF has collected resources and prepared a social media toolkit to help parliamentarians increase public awareness about the relevance of menstrual health for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and encourage them to join the conversation about Menstrual Health this week (May 25-29).

Hashtags: #MPs4MenstrualHealth #MHDAY2020 #ItsTimeForAction #PeriodsInPandemics #MenstrualHealthMatters #MenstrualMay
MPs participate in digital roundtable on reshaping health system capacity and service delivery

ONLINE - 5 African Parliamentarians attended the first of three two-hour Digital Unconferences discussing the role of Private Enterprise & Innovation in Building Future Systems for UHC.

Throughout the developing world, most health systems are characterised by mixed public and private financing and delivery of care. Greater quality and access especially the COVID-19 times we live in, require us to think further on the role of the private sector and how public and private sectors can work together to address the challenges of affordability, quality, and availability of care and achieve Universal Health Coverage including universal access to SRHR.

The three digital workshops will combine short panel discussions on key themes with breakout groups to explore these themes in more depth through the perspectives of the participants. The aims are to facilitate mutual learning, identify key challenges and constraints and define priorities for future collaboration between public and private sector and researchers.

The participating parliamentarians shared their perspectives on the Legislative Role in Advancing Private Sector Engagement, Innovation and Universal Access to SRHR in Future Health Systems.

"COVID-19 is a stress test for health systems and an opportunity for reformation and new partnerships"

5 MP Champions participated in the meeting -
Honourable Marie Rose Nguini-Effa, MP Cameroon
Chair, African Parliamentary Forum on Population and Development (FPA)
Vice-President, Committee on Cultural, Social and Family Affairs
The distinguished high-level panel includes
Hon. Dr. Vinod Paul, Member, National Institution for Transforming India, Government of India (NITI Aayog); Dr. Stefan Swartling Peterson, Associate Director, Programme Division and Chief of Health, UNICEF; Dr. Githinji Gitahi, CEO, Amref Health Africa; Dr. Jayasree K. Iyer, Executive Director, Access to Medicine Foundation

Visit the Digital Unconference series website for more information

How can the EU promote & protect SRHR in upcoming policies in times of COVID-19?

BELGIUM - In the newly released policy brief (see below) with DSW and IPPF EN, EPF sheds light on first knock-on effects of the COVID-19 crisis on contraceptives access and calls for concrete steps to prioritise SRHR services in EU policies.

The lockdown measures have already led to stockouts and disruptions to supply chains for SRH commodities, such as contraceptives and maternal health medicines. In several East
African countries reduced family planning service access and use has been reported. With limited access to HIV testing, contraceptive care and services for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) as well as reduced availability of abortion care and a lack of access to comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), an estimated additional 49 million women will be left with an unmet need for modern contraceptives, resulting in an additional 15 million unintended pregnancies in Low- and Middle Income countries.

The report highlights the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity for the EU to further align its development policies on the Agenda 2030 and on the three pillars of sustainable development, economic, social and environmental. While the world starts planning for a post-pandemic recovery, it points out that, the SDGs can help focus this recovery on inclusion, equality, and sustainability. See the brief below for seven recommendations on how to integrate SRHR policies in EU’s development policies.

Read the policy brief

59 governments release joint statement on protecting SRHR and promoting Gender-responsiveness in the COVID-19 crisis

GLOBAL - Governments released a joint statement on behalf of 59 nations that pushes global access to “sexual and reproductive health needs” as a response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Responding to the “unprecedented threat” of the coronavirus pandemic “requires solidarity and cooperation among all governments, scientists, civil society actors and the private sector,” it noted.

We call on governments around the world to ensure full and unimpeded access to all sexual and reproductive health services for all women and girls.

It is crucial that leaders recognize the central role of Universal Health Coverage (UHC) in health emergencies and the need for robust health systems to save lives. In this context, sexual health services are essential. We recommit to the immediate implementation of the UHC political declaration by all. Funding sexual and reproductive health and rights should remain a priority to avoid a rise in maternal and newborn mortality, increased unmet need for
contraception, and an increased number of unsafe abortions and sexually transmitted infections.

The signatory countries also support “multilateral” efforts by international bodies such as the UN and the WHO, and “welcome UN General Assembly resolution entitled ‘Global Solidarity to fight COVID-19.’”

The statement was signed by the ministers of Argentina, Australia, Albania, Belgium, Bolivia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cabo Verde, Canada, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Fiji, France, Germany, Greece, Guinea, Italy, Latvia, Lebanon, Liberia, Luxembourg, Madagascar, Montenegro, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Namibia, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

It was issued on behalf of the those countries, as well as Armenia, Austria, Bulgaria, Costa Rica, Croatia, Ecuador, Estonia, Georgia, Ireland, Iceland, Japan, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Mexico, Moldova, Peru, Republic of Korea, Slovenia, Tunisia, Republic of Korea, Ukraine and Uruguay.

Read the joint press statement here

Open Letter: 60 French Parliamentarians defend the Right to Abortion during COVID-19

FRANCE - 60 French parliamentarians have signed an open letter calling on the government to facilitate access to abortion during the COVID-19 crisis.

French women’s rights organisations and health professionals were quick to point out the consequences of the nationwide lockdown and the priority-shifting of the health system to treat COVID-19 patients on the right to SRHR services. The saturation of hospitals, the halting of certain surgical procedures, and the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) indicated a barrier in access to abortion treatments. In response, political decision-makers call for timely adjustments in the abortion law, extending time limits and facilitating access.

The open letter calls for:
“the lengthening of the periods of access to abortion from 12 to 14 weeks of pregnancy”;

“simplification of access to medical termination of pregnancy for psychosocial reasons.”

With the start of the deconfinement period, experts expect an increase in late diagnostics and abortion requests, as the lockdown is predicted to have aggravated acts of violence, while restricting the ability obtain consultations or professional help.

The legislators call on the government to take up the task to prevent a decline in women’s rights as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

La Liberation: Le gouvernement doit garantir le droit à l’IVG (in French)

Deliver for Good leads powerful collective action on COVID-19 Response and Request for Action

GLOBAL - The unprecedented global scope and scale of the COVID-19 pandemic is a vivid reminder of the interconnected, interdependent realities of our world. Now, more than ever, the importance of uniting – across sectors, issues, and generations – to build a healthier, more gender-equal future is clear.

Signed by over 700 organizations across 100 countries, a Deliver for Good Campaign letter (see below) gives a clear mandate to all decision-makers and leaders that girls and women must be kept at the heart of COVID-19 prevention, response and recovery. Originally shared as a private letter to the UN Secretary General from the Campaign partners and allies, there has already been tangible action taken from the clear recommendations within, including the incorporation of a strong gender lens in the UN Framework for the Immediate Socio-Economic Response to COVID-19 and the Secretary -General’s UN COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund.

deliver_for_good_open_letter.pdf
Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopts strong Resolution on contraception access

On 26 June 2020, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted a crucial Resolution 2331 (2020) titled: Empowering women: promoting access to contraception in Europe. The rapporteur was Hon. Petra Bayr, MP (Austria). For the first time the parliamentary body of the Council of Europe provided guidelines and recommendations in a Resolution entirely dedicated to improving access to contraception in Europe. It dealt with issues such as removing barriers in access to contraception, including contraception into the health insurance reimbursement schemes, providing access for young and vulnerable populations, ensuring access to emergency contraception without prescription as well as long acting contraception, and providing contraception based on a person’s needs, not on their legal gender marker. It underlined the importance of providing information both at schools through comprehensive sexuality education and through government-run websites. The resolution also dealt with the provision of contraception during the COVID-19 lockdown and called on Member States to consider the provision of contraception as an essential health care service in the times of pandemic.

[Link to the full resolution]
Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe webinar on COVID-19 challenges and opportunities for SRHR

ONLINE - The Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe organised a parliamentary webinar on "COVID-19 and sexual and reproductive health and rights: challenges and opportunities". Moderated by Hon. Petra Bayr, MP (Austria), the webinar aimed to address how Council of Europe Member States must ensure women’s access to sexual and reproductive health and rights in their response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including a discussion of implications of COVID-19 on SRHR for LGBTI people.

Neil Datta highlighted some laudable outcomes from certain European countries where governments quickly reacted by removing barriers to safeguard sexual and reproductive rights in the face of an overburdened health service. For example, some countries lifted prescription requirements, offered contraceptives free of charge, shifted to telemedicine including for abortion pills, or opened alternative shelters for victims of gender-based violence. Post-pandemic, there must be a sustained effort to tackle barriers to SRHR.

"Where there is political will, there is a way to provide fast & effective measures to ensure SRHR are not restricted." - Neil Datta

Nevertheless, pre-existing obstacles to women’s access to sexual and reproductive health and rights have been exacerbated during the pandemic that is deepening gender inequalities. Hon. Fourat Ben Chikha, MP (Belgium) discussed how binary health services lead to gender-based barriers and called for more data on the situation for LGBTI+ in order to tackle discriminatory attitudes towards LGBTI+ people in health care.

"Health care systems must be adapted to the diversity of people’s bodies so that LGBTQI+ people are not left behind. This is a momentum. There will be a post-coronavirus world. We really need political leaders willing to fight for vulnerable groups." - Hon. Fourat Ben Chikha, MP (Belgium)

Finally, the Commissioner for Human Rights Dunja Mijatovic joined the panel and concluded the event, stating it had highlighted that the challenges regarding sexual and reproductive health and rights including for LGBTI+ people are significant and that governments, civil society, parliaments and service providers must continue to work together to address them.

Panelists:
Hon. Petra Bayr, MP (Austria) Chairperson, Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe
Dunja Mijatovic, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights
Monica Ferro, UNFPA, Director of the Geneva office
Hon. Fourat Ben Chikha, MP (Belgium) PACE, General Rapporteur on the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people
Neil Datta, Secretary, EPF
Caroline Hickson, Regional Director, IPPF European Network
Orla O’Connor, Director, National Women's Council of Ireland

Watch the webinar livestream here
Read the Council of Europe issue paper on Women's sexual and reproductive health...

Council of Europe calls on Member States to safeguard SRHR during COVID-19 pandemic

EUROPE - In a statement released today, the Commissioner of Human Rights calls on the Council of Europe's 47 Member States to ensure access to sexual and reproductive health and rights during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Statement (see below) acknowledges official declarations of support and notes proactive initiatives in Slovakia, England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, France and Italy to curb restrictions in access to abortion and contraceptives. The Commissioner of Human Rights welcomes such positive measures and urges all Member States to follow suit - while remaining vigilant in the face of attempts to roll back women's sexual and reproductive rights. Taking into account the risks for women and girls, the Council of Europe issues eight guidelines for Member States to protect sexual and reproductive health and rights.

The Council of Europe Statement
MEMBER NEWS

BELGIAN APPG

Belgian APPG webinar on anti-gender movements and the COVID-19 response

Anti-gender movements have been on the rise in Europe and beyond, outright questioning gender equality, opposing sexual and reproductive rights of women, sexual minorities and young people’s access to information and education about their sexuality. The current Covid-19 response has provided these professionally organised groups with new opportunities to reinforce their agendas.

The Belgian APPG ‘Parliamentarians for the 2030 Agenda’ organised a webinar to deepen their understanding of these globally interconnected movements. Expert Dr. David Paternotte (ULB) explained how these movements repackaged their ideas about human dignity, the right to life, and religious freedom, making them sound modern and fresh, by rephrasing them in Human Rights language, and ultimately trying to change the meaning of human rights concepts.

EPF Secretary Neil Datta explained how the anti-gender movements have moved into the political sphere, where they have come to organise themselves very professionally, with far-right parties openly embracing their anti-gender ideas.

Lastly, Dr. Gabriela Rondon, co-director at Anis, Institute of Bioethics, in Brasilia explained how a wave of extremist populism is mobilising disinformation, anti-gender and anti-public health narratives in Brazil. Facing the Covid-19 pandemic makes that in many countries a strong case can be made for public funding for healthcare, but not in Brazil. Brazil’s president Bolsonera has been spreading a message of distrust about the WHO and China to the Brazilians, framing the fight against covid-19 in a globalist and authoritarian narrative; leaving many Brazilians with no real means to fight the coronavirus and making it the second hardest hit country in the world.