March & April 2020
NEWSLETTER in NUMBERS

170 MPs sign call to action against Polish bills to limit abortion rights and sexuality education

Up to 9.5 million people in 37 countries worldwide risk losing access to contraceptive and safe abortion services in 2020

10 recommendations to decision-makers in EPF’s joint report on SRHR during the COVID-19 pandemic

In the news

A message from the EPF President during the COVID-19 pandemic

BRUSSELS, 30 April 2020 –

"The past months it has become clear that Covid-19 has had some knock-on effects on SRHR. There are increased risks for domestic violence, many SRH services including vaccination
programs are no longer available to women and some governments have been misusing the crisis situation to undermine women’s rights.

EPF, its member MPs and APPG Secretariats have already played a key role in mobilising to highlight these problems and fight for solutions.

Back in March, we convoked an extraordinary EPF Executive Committee online meeting to update one another on our national situations and any concerning trends emerging regarding SRHR and parliamentary democratic processes. A similar online meeting was convened in March for APPG Secretariats.

Via a strong online campaign, we made clear that we were watching Poland, who wanted to criminalise sexuality education, banning abortion & prenatal testing. Other highlights were the issuing of clear guidelines by the Council of Europe to ensure women’s access to SRHR throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, and the strong language on SRHR in the European Parliament’s resolution on Covid-19 on 17 April.

Let us continue this fight and make clear to everyone that we refuse a lockdown for sexual and reproductive rights!”

- Hon Petra De Sutter, MEP and EPF President

Women and girls left without care: a snapshot in time during COVID-19

BRUSSELS, 24 April 2020 - COVID-19 is endangering the sexual and reproductive health and safety of women and girls and vulnerable people across Europe. They are left without access to essential medical services such as contraception and abortion care, HIV and STI testing and reproductive cancer screenings, and respectful maternal healthcare. The huge reduction in these services is putting lives, health and wellbeing at risk, particularly those of vulnerable groups whose only access may be through subsidised services provided by civil society. Gender-based violence has surged, with lockdown making it harder to provide support and shelter to women desperately in need of it.

This report has been compiled by IPPF EN and EPF from surveys that were conducted with their respective stakeholders on the impact of COVID-19 on the sexual and reproductive
health and rights of people, particularly women and girls, in Europe, and on Europe’s international cooperation on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

The content of the report derives from what stakeholders in different countries reported as the situation in their country at the time of reporting – early April - and thus aims to provide an overall 'snapshot in time' of what was clearly already a significant effect of the pandemic on SRHR. However, the situation is highly dynamic and evolving daily, so be aware some of the situations reported may already have changed. We will be producing new information as data comes in, but in the meantime, we hope you find this a useful overview of the current context.

Download: [Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)

**Joint EPF and IPPF EN webinar discusses limited access to SRHR services during COVID-19 pandemic**

ONLINE, 22 April 2020 - EPF co-organised a 90-minute webinar with IPPF European Network to provide an update for members and the SRHR community on the current impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on sexual and reproductive health and rights in Europe.

Caroline Hickson, IPPF EN Regional Director and Neil Datta, EPF Secretary, co-hosted the webinar and presented their latest [publication](#) based on surveys carried out by EPF and IPPF EN between 13 March and 10 April 2020, and which zooms in on a number of thematic areas such as contraception and abortion access, as well as sexual and gender-based violence and European Development Cooperation. The report ends with ten recommendations to decision-makers.

"Governments and the EU must adopt an intersectional and gender-sensitive response to the COVID-19 crisis and include women’s perspectives in decision-making" - Neil Datta, EPF Secretary

Kamila Ferenc and Urszula Grycuk from the Polish Federation for Women and Family Planning (FEDERA) also provided a briefing on the situation in Poland after the recent vote bills against abortion rights and sexuality education were not rejected but sent for further examination in the Parliamentary Commissions.

The webinar concluded with a Q&A round, including interventions from a virtual panel of partners and national experts.
EUROPE, 10 April 2020 - In just two days, 170 parliamentarians from 24 countries across Europe including 26 MEPs signed a call to action voicing deep concern over two draft bills which are going to be voted in the Polish Sejm next week (15 and 16 April 2020) concerning both sexuality education and access to abortion.

The letter, calling on the Polish parliament to reject these draft bills, was sent today to the Marshal of the Polish Sejm; the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights and Secretary General; the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe President and Polish delegation; the COREPER Health Deputy Permanent Representatives and the European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety.

Tabled amidst the enforced lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic, Polish society cannot take to the streets in protest as was seen in the 2016 so-called 'Black Protests'. The letter reads,

"The current actions of the Polish government can only be considered as a cowardly move designed to evade democratic scrutiny as currently there are very limited options for Polish society to voice their opposition to such harsh initiatives”.

It continues,
"We urge the Polish Parliament to respect the right of women to make autonomous decisions about their own bodies and reproductive functions, which are at the very core of their fundamental right to equality and privacy concerning intimate matters of physical and psychological integrity. We also condemn the shift in Poland towards misinforming young people, and stigmatising and banning sexuality education. We call on the Polish Authorities to refrain from adopting the bill, which follows recent attempts to limit sexual and reproductive rights in Poland, including the right to abortion.”

Parliamentarians have been calling out the move on Twitter.

See below the full letter and signatories, as well as a thank you letter from The Federation for Women and Family Planning (Federa).

Download:
Letter to COREPER Health
Letter to Marshal of the Sejm
Letter to European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety
Letter to Council of Europe
EPF Vice-President joins WHO Director-General in webinar on parliamentary action

ONLINE, 28 April 2020 - EPF Executive Committee Vice-President Hon. Petra Bayr, MP participated on a high-level webinar entitled: "Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic: parliamentary action to reduce risks, increase resilience and strengthen emergency preparedness".

"One of our priorities as MPs is to keep parliamentarianism alive during the pandemic to ensure respect of democratic processes and government oversight." - Hon. Petra Bayr, MP

The webinar focused on COVID-19 pandemic preparedness and response to provide parliamentarians and parliamentary staff with an overview of the current status of the pandemic and its cascading risks and consequences for a country, including the impacts beyond the health sector. Panelists also drew lessons learnt and best practices from this emergency to reflect on how to ensure enhanced disaster risk management including preventive measures and preparedness for effective response to pandemics in the future.

"As a former MP myself, I know the critical role parliaments can play in health emergencies. Parliaments ensure public health systems are adequately funded. They build accountability through oversight of government actions. Parliamentarians play a key role in ensuring national unity, which is the foundation of global solidarity and is key in defeating this pandemic." - Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General

The webinar was co-organised by the IPU, World Health Organization (WHO) and UNDRR United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction.

Speakers:

Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General
Mr. Martin Chungong, IPU Secretary General
Ms. Mami Mizutori, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction and Head of UNDRR
Dr. Michael Ryan, Executive Director, WHO Health Emergencies Programme,
Dr. Maria Van Kerkhove, WHO COVID-19 Technical Lead
Hon. Petra Bayr, Member of Parliament, Austria; Member of the IPU Advisory Group on Health
EPF Executive Committee sends letter to Lithuanian Health Minister following alarming public statement on abortion

VILNIUS, 22 April 2020 - During the nationwide coronavirus quarantine, introduced on March 16, healthcare institutions are no longer providing non-essential services. Some healthcare institutions in Lithuania have included abortion services in the non-essential list of services. During a press conference on Wednesday, when asked what women who need an abortion should do, Health Minister Aurelijus Veryga said it could be an occasion for women to "reconsider" their choice.

"I'd urge families and women to be responsible and not to use methods that are illegal or could harm their health," Veryga said.

"And in cases where clinics decide not to provide pregnancy termination services, this could be an occasion for families or women to consult once more with doctors, psychologists and use the moment to reconsider their decision, decide not to terminate pregnancy," he added.

Nine members of parliaments that make up EPF's Executive Committee responded with a letter addressed to the Minister of Health, as well as the Lithuanian President, Speaker of Seimas, Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition.

A lockdown is not a reason to restrict women's and girl’s reproductive rights, including the possibility of terminating a pregnancy.

Abortion is an individual decision for each woman which does not require the approval of politicians and, furthermore guaranteed by Lithuanian law. In these difficult times it is improper to impose unnecessary restrictions on women’s access to legal health care services particularly when these are time sensitive.

We therefore urge the Minister of Health of the Republic of Lithuania to respect the right of women to make autonomous decisions about their own bodies and reproductive functions, which are at the very core of their fundamental right to equality and privacy concerning intimate matters of physical and psychological integrity.

Download: EPF ExCom letter to Lithunania MoH April 2020
ONLINE, 09 April 2020 - As the Ebola outbreak continues to evolve, and the risk of African countries detecting new cases of COVID-19 remains high; African Parliamentarians have been at the fore intervening to support citizens within their communities and participating in online leadership dialogues to chart out best strategies. Recently, 12 Parliamentarians from different African Countries were part of the Africa Leadership Dialogue where the Africa CDC, which is a specialised technical institution of the African Union, led a discussion on Africa's continental COVID-19 response strategy.

The forum provided a great opportunity to advance Africa’s coordinated response and provided a good opportunity to hear from different leaders across the continent. Parliamentarians in Africa continue to play a key role in legislation, establish, strengthen, track and manage systems for COVID-19 response both at country and at regional levels. Linking MPs and the Africa CDC continental response has helped improve Parliamentarians understanding of COVID-19 disease surveillance and their access to available real-time data that would inform decision making at national levels.

The meeting was led by Dr. Nkengasong the Director of the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and facilitated by Dr. Githinji Gitahi the AMREF Global Chief Executive Officer in and Edwin Macharia the Global Managing Partner of Dalberg Advisors.

Visit the Africa CDC website for more updates and future events

Amidst COVID-19 pandemic, EPF launches social media campaign to defend and protect SRHR
ONLINE, 6 April 2020 - In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, EPF have launched a social media campaign to raise awareness about the impact that the pandemic is having on sexual and reproductive health and rights. All messages are shared with the created hashtag #NoLockdown4SRHR.

For social media visuals and messages, click here

**EPF joins College of Europe Gender Equality event panel**

BRUGES, 06 March 2020 - The College of Europe hosted an event called "Partners in Time: The role of men and women in promoting equal opportunities today". The conference explored the topic of gender equality to assess the part men have already contributed to and can still play, in synergy with women, to achieve equal rights. The event sent the message men and women should both actively contribute to the creation of a society where they share equal opportunities.

The conference started with a keynote address by Dr Joyce MUSHABEN (University of Missouri – St. Louis) on "Real Men, Strong Women, and the European Equality Agenda: A US-Feminist Perspective on Ursula von der Leyen and Gender Mainstreaming." After that, a panel debate counted on the interventions of former MEP Jackie Jones and Neil Datta, EPF Secretary.

View the event photo album
View the College of Europe event coverage
EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT NEWS
European Parliament calls on Member States to guarantee safe and timely access to SRHR

BRUSSELS, 17 April 2020 - The European Parliament adopted a resolution on EU coordinated action to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences. One of the key demands from the European Parliament was to call on Member states and the EU institutions to monitor and uphold access to Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR).

The European Parliament calls on the Member States to effectively guarantee safe and timely access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and the necessary healthcare services for all women and girls during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially access to contraception, including emergency contraception, and to abortion care; strongly rejects any attempts to backtrack on SRHR and LGBTI rights, and in this context condemns the attempts to further criminalise abortion care, stigmatise HIV positive people, and undermine young people’s access to sexuality education in Poland, as well as the attack on transgender and intersex people’s rights in Hungary; - Paragraph 48 of the European Parliament resolution

Read the full resolution

EUROPEAN COMMISSION NEWS

European Commission publishes new progressive Gender Equality Strategy

![Gender Equality Strategy](image)

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT NEWS

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Read the full resolution

EUROPEAN COMMISSION NEWS

European Commission publishes new progressive Gender Equality Strategy

![Gender Equality Strategy](image)
BRUSSELS, 05 March 2020 - The European Commission published its new Gender Equality Strategy today. The EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 aims to deliver on the von der Leyen Commission’s commitment to achieving a Union of Equality. The Strategy presents policy objectives and actions to make progress by 2025 “towards a gender-equal Europe”. The goal is a Union where women and men, girls and boys, in all their diversity, are free to pursue their chosen path in life, have equal opportunities to thrive, and can equally participate in and lead our European society.

The key objectives and measures proposed focus on ending gender-based violence; challenging gender stereotypes; closing gender gaps in the labour market; achieving equal participation across different sectors of the economy; addressing the gender pay and pension gaps; closing the gender care gap and achieving gender balance in decision-making and in politics.

"In health, women and men experience gender-specific health risks. A gender dimension will be integrated into the EU Beating Cancer Plan to be launched in 2020. Regular exchanges of good practices between Member States and stakeholders on the gender aspects of health will be facilitated, including on sexual and reproductive health and rights.”

"The EU will continue supporting women’s human rights, its defenders, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and efforts to curb sexual and gender-based violence throughout the world, including in fragile, conflict and emergency situations.”

EPF and MEPs for SRR are pleased to see the strategy includes mention to sexual and reproductive health and rights in the chapter on gender mainstreaming and health policies as well as in the actions proposed for external policies. EPF parliamentarians will ensure to monitor progress and encourage the Commission to regularly and actively raise awareness for best practices across Member States which could help reducing inequalities in accessing SRH services in general.

Read more here

EU proposes an Africa partnership based on human rights

BRUSSELS, 09 March 2020 - The European Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy proposed the basis for a new strategy with Africa. The communication sets out proposals to intensify cooperation through partnerships in five key areas: green transition; digital transformation; sustainable growth and jobs; peace and governance; and migration and mobility. Based on this document, Europe will engage discussions with African partners towards a new joint strategy to be endorsed at the European Union – African Union Summit in October 2020.
Initiatives will be undertaken for and with women and youth (including children), supporting their economic empowerment, ensuring their active involvement in decision-making processes of civic and political life, promoting sexual and reproductive health and rights, and preventing and eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls, including conflict related sexual and gender-based violence.

Decent work opportunities will be key to providing prospects to rapidly growing African youth. This goes hand in hand with a healthy workforce, environment and decent working conditions. In particular, this requires health and safety at work, inclusive social protection systems, universal health coverage, access to quality health services, including family planning, and fighting against inequality and, discrimination, child labour (especially in the agricultural sector) and forced labour.

EPF and MEPs for SRR are glad to see the Partnership communication is rooted in full respect of human rights without discrimination on any ground, promoting SRHR, Family Planning and with a focus on universal health coverage, gender equality, women and youth.

Read more here

COUNCIL OF EUROPE NEWS

Council of Europe Secretary General and Commissioner for Human Rights respond to MP Call to Action on Polish draft bills

STRASBOURG, 24 April 2020 - Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, and Council of Europe Secretary General, Marija Pečinović Burić responded to the call to action ahead of the vote in the Polish Sejm on the bills "Stop abortion" and "Stop Paedophilia" signed by 170 parliamentarians from 24 countries. See their responses in the below link and attachment.

"Both bills take the exact opposite direction to my prior recommendations and I can only repeat my earlier calls to reject them. Rather than to try to make abortion illegal and to push it further underground, Poland should make abortion legal on a woman's request in early pregnancy, and thereafter throughout pregnancy to protect women's health and lives and ensure freedom from ill-treatment", Commissioner Dunja Mijatović

The votes took place in the Polish Sejm last week and the bills were not rejected but sent for further examination in the Parliamentary Commissions, thus continuing the stalemate on abortion and sexuality education for Polish citizens. These bills could come back at any time over the next 3.5 years (the course of the current term of the Polish Sejm).
EPF hopes to count on continued parliamentary solidarity with Polish women and upholding the sexual and reproductive health and rights of all.

Download: 🇪🇺 Council of Europe Secretary General, Ms Marija Pejićinović Burić letter

Official statement from Dunja Mijatović, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights