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NEWS IN BRIEF ON COVID-19 & SRHR IN EUROPE

2nd Edition: 10 April – 3 May 2020

This bulletin provides links and a brief overview of recent media coverage and developments regarding access to sexual and reproductive health care 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 2nd Edition of the Bulletin. A 1st Edition covering news between 20 March – 9 April 2020 was published on 9 April 2020.

The COVID-19 public health crisis is impacting access to quality sexual and reproductive health care across Europe. In particular, the harm caused by pre-existing medically unnecessary legal and policy barriers in access to SRHR services is exacerbated in the pandemic context.

➢ Some countries have taken important steps to address these barriers. For example, France, Ireland, and parts of the UK have adopted measures to secure **access to abortion care** during the pandemic, including by legalizing teleconsultations and use of early medical abortion at home.

➢ However, in many places such as Austria, Croatia, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Northern Ireland, Romania, and Slovakia there are reports of sizable challenges in safe access to timely abortion care during the pandemic.

➢ Access to **contraceptive services** due to the COVID-19 crisis has also been restricted in a number of countries.

➢ Reports also indicate that the crisis is having serious implications for women giving birth in **maternal health care** settings.

➢ According to reports some countries such as Denmark, France, Greece, and the UK have suspended most **medically assisted reproduction** treatments.

In addition, some governments have sought to take advantage of the crisis to restrict access to certain SRHR services. The Polish Parliament has debated bills that seek to severely limit access to abortion care and criminalize the provision of sexuality education, while the Hungarian Government is proposing a law that would end legal gender recognition for transgender people. Meanwhile, anti-abortion groups in Italy, Slovakia, and the UK are reportedly campaigning for abortion care to be suspended during the pandemic.

COUNTRY NEWS

AUSTRIA

Abortion & contraception: There are reports that only 5 hospitals in Austria are providing abortion care in the context of the pandemic and that women are facing challenges in accessing abortion and contraceptive services. There have been calls on the government to waive prescription requirements for contraception and to cover the costs of contraception and abortion care at least until the end of the year. [Saltzburg24]

CROATIA

Abortion: There are indications that the inaccessibility of abortion services has increased in Croatia during the pandemic, particularly due to increasing abortion fees and rising numbers of refusals of care by individual providers as well as hospitals. There have been calls on the government to address these barriers and ensure access to abortion care. [RTL]

CZECH REPUBLIC

Maternal health: Reports indicate that the temporary ban on the presence of a companion during facility-based childbirth that was previously introduced by the Czech Ministry of Health in March as part of its response to the pandemic is no longer in force. [iDNES]

FRANCE

Abortion: France has extended access to medical abortion for home use from 7 to 9 weeks of pregnancy and doctors and midwives have been authorized to prescribe the medications by teleconsultation during the COVID-19 pandemic. [RFI] [France 3] In addition, reports indicate that the French Minister of Social Affairs and Health has indicated that "psychosocial distress" is now considered a valid reason for abortion past the 12-week term limit if it jeopardizes the woman's health. [FranceInfo]

GERMANY

Abortion: There are reports about increasing challenges in access to abortion care in Germany during the pandemic. Several parliamentary groups of the German Federal Parliament are calling on the government to ensure safe access to abortion care during the pandemic including by recognizing surgical abortion as emergency treatment and waiving the mandatory waiting period requirement. [Der Spiegel]

Maternal health: The German Midwives Association has criticized the decision by some clinics to temporarily ban the presence of a companion during childbirth. [Zeit] [tagesschau]

GREECE

Assisted reproduction: Reports indicate that IVF treatments in Greece have been put on hold during the COVID-19 pandemic. [Quartz] [The National Herald]

HUNGARY

Legal gender recognition: Reports indicate that the Hungarian government is seeking to adopt new legislation that would end the legal recognition of transgender people. The law would define gender as "biological sex based on primary sex characteristics and chromosomes" making it impossible for people to legally change their gender. [The Guardian]

LITHUANIA

Abortion: Some health care facilities in Lithuania have reportedly stopped providing abortion care during the pandemic. When asked about the situation, the Lithuanian Health Minister suggested that it could be an occasion for women to "reconsider" their decision to terminate their pregnancy. [LRT] [15min]

NETHERLANDS

Abortion: A court in the Netherlands has reportedly refused to allow a woman in COVID-19 quarantine to access early medical abortion at home, instead requiring her to comply with pre-existing regulations that the first of two abortion pills be taken in a clinical setting. [rtl nieuws]

NORTH MACEDONIA

Maternal health: A 37-year-old Romani woman who was 9 months pregnant has reportedly died from childbirth complications while in labor after being denied care for several days and waiting for emergency care for more than six hours while hospital staff waited for the results of her COVID-19 test. [Romea]

POLAND

Abortion & sexuality education: On 16 April 2020 the Polish Parliament debated two legislative proposals that if adopted will severely limit access to abortion care and criminalize the provision of sexuality education. Following the debate the Parliament voted to send the bills to parliamentary commissions for further examination. [CNN]

Reports continue to indicate that legal abortions that were ordinarily very difficult to access in Poland are even more difficult to obtain in the pandemic context. [FP]

ROMANIA

Abortion: There are reports that only 11% of public hospitals in Romania are still performing abortions on request in the first trimester during the pandemic, and that none of these hospitals are in Bucharest. [EURACTIV] [Libertatea]

RUSSIA

Abortion: There are reports that most hospitals in Moscow are not performing abortions during the pandemic and are classifying them as non-urgent procedures. [socportal]

SLOVAKIA

Abortion: The Slovak Ombudsperson and civil society have called on the Slovak Minister of Health to ensure women's access to safe and timely abortion care following reports that many hospitals in the country are no longer providing legal abortions during the pandemic. [SME] [EURACTIV] [Zeny v meste]

SLOVENIA

Abortion: Reports indicate that abortion care is being treated as essential healthcare in Slovenia and that women are able to access timely care during the pandemic. [Svet24]

UNITED KINGDOM

Assisted reproduction: The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA) in the UK has reportedly ruled that all current IVF treatments must end by 15 April and that all new treatments must be postponed for public health reasons during the pandemic. [inews]

Contraception: There are reports that women in the UK are facing challenges in access to long-acting reversible contraception and hormonal contraception, as a number of sexual and reproductive health clinics have closed down or are operating with very limited service. [The Independent]

Northern Ireland

Abortion: Although medical professionals can now provide legal abortion services in Northern Ireland, the province has not yet allowed access to care via telemedicine or has not moved to allow women seeking early medical abortion to take both pills at home. [The Impartial Reporter] [The Independent]

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

COUNCIL OF EUROPE

Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights: Learning from the pandemic to better fulfil the right to health [Human Rights Comment]; COVID-19 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

European Parliament: Resolution of 17 April 2020 on EU coordinated action to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences (2020/2616(RSP)) [Resolution]

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

United Nations: COVID-19 and Human Rights: We are all in this together [Report]; The Impact of COVID-19 on Women [Policy Brief]

Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women: Call for joint action in the times of the COVID-19 pandemic [Statement]; Guidance note on CEDAW and COVID-19 [Guidance Note]

Working Group on discrimination against women and girls: Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic must not discount women and girls [Statement]

World Health Organization: Addressing Human Rights as Key to the COVID-19 Response [Publication]

WHO, UNFPA, UNICEF: Continuing essential Sexual, Reproductive, Maternal, Neonatal, Child and Adolescent Health services during COVID-19 pandemic [Publication]

WHO Regional Office for Europe, the European Commission, and the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies: COVID-19 Health System Response Monitor [Monitor]