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BELARUS targets women human rights defenders after disputed August elections

Independent UN experts criticized Belarus on Tuesday for persecuting women human rights defenders, who have been involved in the mass protests underway in the country since August's controversial presidential election.

Un News (03.11.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3przINJ> - "Belarus has effectively criminalized human rights work at a time when the work of human rights defenders is more essential than ever", said Mary Lawlor, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders.

'Special courage'

As the Government continues to crack down on demonstrators protesting the election, Ms. Lawlor said that "women human rights defenders are being particularly targeted".

At least three of them have come under attack simply for doing their job during September and early October: "In Belarus, as in many other countries, it takes special courage for women to stand up for human rights", upheld the UN expert.

Lodging charges

Ms. Lawlor drew attention to the arrest of Maria Rabkova – volunteer coordinator of a human rights centre that documents freedom of assembly and other rights – who is facing between six months and three years in prison on the grounds of educating or preparing people to participate in mass riots.

"The charge against Maria Rabkova is tantamount to the criminalization of human rights work", she said. "Belarusian authorities must release her immediately and drop all charges."

The UN expert also expressed concern over the prosecution of Irina Sukhiy and Marina Dubina, human rights defenders in the environmental non-governmental organization, Ecohome, who were detained on charges of violating protest procedures.

She noted that as the case progressed, authorities changed dates, saying that one date was specified when they were arrested, but exchanged for another in court, during sentencing.

"These apparent irregularities are extremely concerning", attested Ms. Lawlor.

"Inconsistencies in the formal accusations brought against these two brave women raise serious questions as to the legal basis for their initial detention and subsequent sentencing", she added.

Both women received short sentences of administrative detention.

Human rights work essential during unrest

The Special Rapporteur maintained that the work of human rights defenders is more essential than ever in times of unrest.

"When the risk of human rights violations increases, the documentation work carried out by defenders becomes crucial", Ms. Lawlor flagged. "They must not be punished for pursuing it".

Endorsing the remarks were Anaïs Marin, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus; Clément Nyaletsossi Voule, Special Rapporteur on the rights of peaceful assembly and association; the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention; and the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls.

Special Rapporteurs and independent experts are appointed by the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council to examine and report back on a specific human rights theme or a country situation. The positions are honorary and the experts are not paid for their work.

BELARUS' female revolution: how women rallied against Lukashenko

Protests aimed at toppling autocratic leader have been led by women and show no sign of slowing.

By Shaun Walker

The Guardian (12.09.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3bXFJWD> - One evening last week, a stylised image of the Belarusian opposition leader, Maria Kolesnikova, was projected on to the wall of a Minsk apartment block.

Mocked up to look like the famous Soviet war poster The Motherland Calls, the image created by Anna Redko shows Kolesnikova heroically holding out a torn passport – a reference to her actions on the border with Ukraine on Tuesday when Alexander Lukashenko's security services tried to deport her.

"She decided on a powerful gesture. That's why she is one of the opposition's leaders and I'm the press secretary," Ivan Kravtsov, one of two others with Kolesnikova who did get deported, told journalists in Kyiv the next day.

Kolesnikova is now in a KGB prison in Minsk, and her determination not to be forced into exile was the latest impressive act of defiance in a revolutionary moment that has, from the beginning, been led and defined by women. On Saturday afternoon, women holding flowers and posters gathered in Minsk to protest – some were detained by masked men in green uniforms. The Saturday demonstrations have become a regular occurrence before the main Sunday protest in the city centre, where for the past four weekends, more than 100,000 people have assembled.

It was a female candidate who rallied support against Lukashenko before last month's elections. The autocratic leader had jailed or exiled the men who wanted to stand against him, but thinking a woman could not pose a real challenge, he allowed the wife of one of his opponents, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, on to the ballot. Along with Kolesnikova and Veronika Tsepkalo, the wife of another candidate who fled Belarus after receiving threats, the three women travelled the country and won support for their simple message of facilitating political change.

Lukashenko's misogynist rhetoric also served as a mobilising force. "The cynicism with which the current president expressed himself about them and their role, it insulted a lot of women," said Kolesnikova in an interview at her campaign headquarters in central Minsk last month.

It was also women who provided the momentum for the protest movement's rejuvenation after the horrific violence inflicted on demonstrators in the aftermath of Lukashenko declaring an implausible victory.

After three evenings of brutality from riot police, 250 women, dressed in white and holding flowers, stood defiantly on a roadside in central Minsk. Police left them untouched and the next day there were multiple rows of flower-waving women throughout the city.

In recent weeks, as most of its leaders have been forced out of Belarus, Kolesnikova has become the visible face of the movement, appearing fearless and cheerful despite the odds stacked against the protesters, regularly appearing at rallies until her kidnap-style arrest earlier this week.

Last month she said her role had been simply to show people that it was possible to demand political change. She said: "The west, Russia won't help – we can only help ourselves. In this way it turned out that female faces became a signal for women, and men too, that every person should take responsibility."

BELGIUM: Etterbeek replaces colonial street names with women's names

By Maïthé Chini

The Brussels Times (15.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3eeFQNL> - From Monday, the Brussels' commune of Etterbeek has replaced the names of eleven streets, that were named after Belgians with a colonial history, with women's names.

The new name signs are temporary and will only stay in place for half a year. With this measure, the college of aldermen wants to decolonise the street names, and show that it is also possible to tell the other side of history.

"We want to see more women represented. And we want to tackle the overrepresentation of the colonial names," said alderman for Public Space Karim Sheikh Hassan. "Of its own

accord, the urban landscape does not change so fast, but we wanted to do something temporary,” he added.

Many street names, named after Belgians with a military history in the former Belgian colony, have made way for women’s names. “We chose a mix of Etterbeek women and international women,” said Sheik Hassan.

“We need to allow the people of Etterbeek to own their public space. It also goes with knowing why the place where you live has a certain name, and what is behind it,” he added.

A few of the women represented are Rosa Parks, who fought against racial segregation in the United States, the Algerian Lalla Fatma N’Soumer, who fought against French domination, or the Polish Irena Sendlerowa, who saved Jews from Nazi-Germany.

From Etterbeek, the feminist Elise Soyer and the artist Marthe Wery were chosen. The first female doctor of law in Brussels was also given a nameplate, Marie Popelin.

“The number of streets bearing women’s names is ridiculously low. We have chosen to pay tribute to women who illustrate the diversity of backgrounds and origins that make up the richness of the Brussels population,” said Françoise de Halleux, alderman for Equal Opportunities and Diversity in a Facebook post.

Initially, the aim was to launch the street names around International Women’s Day (8 March), but that plan was delayed because of the coronavirus.

The nameplates are part of a broader decolonisation programme organised by the College of Aldermen, which will also include various educational walks for residents and schools will follow in the autumn.

BELGIUM: Famous Belgian lawyer does not hire women because of #MeToo

By Maïthé Chini

The Brussels Times (09.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2TQY9Rk> - A Belgian high profile lawyer, Sven Mary, recently stated in an interview with a Belgian newspaper that his law firm no longer hires women because of the #MeToo movement.

When a woman applies for a job at Sven Mary’s law firm, she will be rejected out of fear for #MeToo, he said in an interview with Het Laatste Nieuws on Friday.

According to an analysis by the Harvard Business Review, men are less inclined to hire attractive women since #MeToo, a movement against sexual harassment and sexual assault, took off. Mary said that this was true, and that his firm no longer hires women in general since there had been “an incident with an intern,” he said.

“It’s a shame, because a lot of competent and intelligent ladies graduate. But I once had a problem with an intern who claimed that she owed her poor evaluation to the fact that she hadn’t accepted my advances,” Mary said, adding that the complaint was “based on nothing” but that “today, as a man, you are vulnerable” and that he did not want to expose himself to such risks.

"I understand that such accusations cut in. But basically, saying that no woman is going to be hired? I'm afraid he won't get away with that," labour market expert Jan Denys told De Morgen. "Women who are working in good faith are being punished here. I'm assuming, in time, Mary will come to understand that," he added.

In addition, rejecting applications from a specific group of people is prohibited by law. "It does not differ a lot from employers who say they have a problem with Moroccans, for example," Denys said, adding that in reality, an employer takes on whoever they want. "Those who effectively do not want to recruit women can still hide behind the fact that the woman in question is not competent enough," he added. "However, by Mary's saying it, he is not making it easy on himself," Denys stressed.

On social media, Mary's remark has garnered a lot of attention, and many people on Twitter have called for an investigation by Unia, the Belgian centre for equal opportunities.

Assita Kanko, a Belgian MEP and human rights activist tweeted "Lawyer for serious criminals. Afraid of victims of sexual violence," pointing to several of Mary's clients, which include Salah Abdeslam, who is a suspect of the terror attacks in Paris, and Fouad Belkacem, who was an extremist member of the radical Islamic organisation Sharia4Belgium.

BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA: Petition calls on Google to remove Bosnia 'rape camp' from search

Vilina Vlas spa, where Serb forces raped 200 Bosniak women, girls is listed on international travel and booking sites.

By Mersiha Gadzo

Al Jazeera (25.08.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3qZ5IxP> - There is not a room or spot in the Vilina Vlas hotel where women were not raped or people were not killed, according to Bakira Hasecic, president of Bosnia's Women Victims of War (WVW) association and a rape survivor from Visegrad.

It is estimated that Serb forces captured and raped at least 200 women and girls, mostly Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims), in 1992 in the hotel in Visegrad, eastern Bosnia.

Some of the victims were as young as 14. Fewer than 10 made it out alive.

Their husbands, brothers and sons were also tortured and killed in the hotel.

Over the years, the few survivors have testified to media about what took place there.

One survivor, who wished to remain anonymous, told Balkan Insight how Bosnian Serb strongman Milan Lukic, head of the Serb paramilitary White Eagles - also known as Avengers - raped her at her home in Visegrad after killing her 16-year-old son in front of her with a knife.

Lukic then took the woman to Vilina Vlas, where she lost count of how many times she was raped.

She said: "There were many women held in the hotel and there was blood everywhere".

"All the rooms in the hotel were locked. Every day they threw us bread which we had to catch with our teeth as our hands were tied. The only time they untied us is when they raped us," she said.

A tourist attraction

Yet, the hotel has been promoted this summer as a tourist attraction by Republika Srpska, Bosnia's semi-autonomous Serb-run entity created under the Dayton Peace Agreement that ended the country's bloody conflict in early 90s - and also promoted by Visegrad municipality's tourism organisation as part of an overall campaign.

The campaign, with its disquieting slogan, "We're waiting for you in Visegrad", distributed gift vouchers to attract visitors to the town. Vilina Vlas is among the participating hotels.

The Republika Srpska tourism website advertises the rehabilitation centre as an "aerial spa" due to its "altitude and natural environment" and boasts of its thermal waters.

Under the same tourism campaign, Visegrad municipality has been promoting its Andricgrad (Andric city), a mini-town theme park, which is financially supported in part by the Serbian government.

Part of the Andricgrad complex was built at the site of a former sports centre, which Serb forces had used as a detention camp for Bosniak civilians in 1992.

There is no mention of the war crimes that took place at Vilina Vlas or elsewhere in town, an example of the denial that can be common among Serbs in Republika Srpska, including its political elite.

But the hotel also remains listed on many international booking sites, including Trip Advisor, with photos showing a spa nestled in the forest, with no mention that the hotel was used as a rape camp and killing site.

Online petition

As soon as it became apparent that Republika Srpska authorities were promoting Vilina Vlas as a tourist spot, an online petition was launched, calling on Google to remove the hotel as a tourist site from Google search and Google Maps. The petition has so far gathered 25,000 signatures.

"Dear Google, if somebody decided to turn Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camps into a wellness retreat perfect for a 'relaxing weekend getaway', would you let them promote this on Google? Would you allow it to appear on Google maps as a tourist facility?" the petition launched by Bosnian Amela Trokic read.

"Since the Bosnian war in the 1990s not much has changed in the hotel and guests can choose to sleep in one of the many rooms or 160 available beds; the same rooms and beds where women were raped and men were tortured, beaten and killed as the furniture remains the same.

"Though we cannot stop mentally deranged people from knowingly visiting and staying at this disgusting building, we can stop the active promotion of it," the petition read.

Google did not respond to Al Jazeera's request for comment.

Trokic told Al Jazeera that a friend of hers had contacted Trip Advisor last month, informing them why the hotel should be removed from its listings, but the booking

website responded saying it was not "in the position to provide comments regarding the past histories of the property in question" and as such, would "not remove accommodation listings if they are still operational".

Many foreign tourists have stayed at the hotel, oblivious to the torture that took place at the site, including Australian actress Kym Vercoe in 2008.

'Where women were raped'

WVW President Bakira Hasecic told Al Jazeera that the Serb paramilitaries that committed brutal mass rape of women and girls for four months in the hotel in 1992, where the victims were also killed. Five of the victims took their own lives.

One of them, 24-year-old Jasmina Ahmetpahic, took her own life by jumping from the third floor of the hotel after being tortured and raped repeatedly.

"All guests who stay in the rooms in Vilina Vlas - if they didn't know, they know now ... They're sleeping in beds where women were raped and swimming in a pool where people were killed," Hasecic said.

"Authorities of Visegrad, Republika Srpska don't want to talk about the topic of torture in the hotel and hotel staff don't want to tell guests the truth of what happened in these rooms."

Hasecic also said that a memorial should be added to the site and the street that leads to the hotel should be renamed to honour Jasmina Ahmetpahic.

Hikmet Karcic, author and genocide researcher, told Al Jazeera that sites where mass atrocities took place, such as Vilina Vlas, have been "hijacked by the Republika Srpska authorities and normalised for everyday use".

'Rape as genocide'

Edina Becirevic, genocide scholar at the University of Sarajevo, told Al Jazeera that what happened at Vilina Vlas was one of the examples of the "rape as genocide" that took place during the war, and part of the pattern of ethnic cleansing against Bosniaks that was carried out throughout the country for almost four years.

"Genocide denial is pervasive in the Bosnian and Herzegovinian entity Republika Srpska and promoting Vilina Vlas as [a] touristic attraction with financial support by the Serbian government additionally confirms their complicity in genocide in Bosnia" during and after the war, Becirevic said.

Serb forces had killed so many Bosniaks in the summer of 1992, that their bodies which were thrown into the Drina river sometimes clogged a hydropower plant in a border town in Serbia.

It prompted the director to write to the Visegrad police inspector, requesting that "whoever was responsible please slow the flow of corpses down the Drina", The Guardian reported at the time.

In 2009, the ICTY sentenced Lukic to life in prison, convicting him of war crimes including murder, cruelty, persecution and other crimes against humanity committed from 1992 to 1994.

Hasecic said it is "incomprehensible that following such horrible crimes, authorities have the bravery to offer rooms to guests".

"For us victims who survived, Vilina Vlas hotel was and will remain a hotel with a dark past and we will not give up," Hasecic said. "We will always speak the truth about what happened and fight for truth and justice to win."

EU: Top EU Court sets limits on workplace head-scarf ban

Ruling sets out conditions on when such prohibitions comply with the bloc's antidiscrimination laws

By Laurence Norman and Noemie Bisserbe

Wall Street Journal (15.07.2021) - <https://on.wsj.com/3C693GP> - The European Union's top court said Thursday that employers may ban the wearing of head scarves and other religious symbols but set out conditions on when such prohibitions comply with the bloc's antidiscrimination laws.

The ruling comes amid intensifying debate in Europe over racism and the protection of minority rights following a surge of anti-immigrant parties over recent years. Rules over wearing head scarves, which vary widely across the bloc, have come to symbolize controversy over calls to integrate Europe's Muslim population.

French President Emmanuel Macron and other French authorities have increasingly sought to curtail the display of religious symbols amid a campaign [to assert the country's secular state](#).

Meanwhile, following widespread antiracism protests in the U.S. after the killing of George Floyd, there have been growing calls in some Western European countries to push back against discrimination and racism.

Judges of the Luxembourg-based European Court of Justice in their ruling Thursday upheld a 2017 decision by the court saying that a private company's decision to ban the wearing of a head scarf to promote a neutral working environment wasn't necessarily discriminatory.

The ruling permits employers to bar religious, political or philosophical symbols in a workplace if such guidelines are universally applied by the company because of the need for neutrality for business purposes, for example a school where parents don't want their children to be supervised by people who manifest their religious beliefs.

However, the judges moved to limit the circumstances under which a ban is justified after two German courts had asked for guidance on cases involving two women: a special-needs caregiver at a child-care center who was temporarily suspended from her job and a cashier who sued for discrimination after she was ordered to come to work without a head scarf.

The court said that in addition to applying the rules equally to all political or religious groups, a company must have evidence that its activities would suffer adverse consequences and that the scale and severity of this impact justified the ban.

The ECJ also said national courts should take into account additional protections against discrimination that some countries, including Germany, have embedded in their laws. And the court signaled it would be discriminatory if a company chose to ban conspicuous symbols, like the head scarf, but didn't forbid all smaller visible religious or political signs.

The 2017 EU court ruling had prompted a backlash from Muslim and Jewish groups who warned it could exclude some people from their communities from certain jobs. The decision has also faced criticism from some former senior ECJ legal officers. Thursday's ruling drew attacks from advocacy groups.

"Laws, policies and practices prohibiting religious dress are targeted manifestations of Islamophobia that seek to exclude Muslim women from public life or render them invisible," said Maryam H'madoun, a policy officer at the Open Society Justice Initiative.

France's highest appeals court in recent years has sided with employers in cases involving Muslim women wearing head scarves at work, when a company's internal policy clearly banned overt religious symbols. In 2017, that court ruled in favor of French information-technology firm [Micropole](#) SA, which dismissed Asma Bougnaoui, a design engineer, after a customer complained about her head scarf.

French civil servants aren't allowed to wear overt religious symbols at work under France's strict secular rules. But these rules don't apply in the private sector.

Islam and its place in French society has been [at the center of a heated debate](#) in France in the wake of recent terrorist attacks.

Mr. Macron [has proposed a bill to Parliament](#) that aims to push back against what he calls Islamist separatism, which he describes as a political and religious project to create a parallel society where religious laws take precedence over civil ones. The bill is currently before the Senate, which has sought to add provisions barring school field-trip chaperones from wearing overt religious symbols, and banning burkinis in public swimming pools.

In Belgium recently, there was a major political incident after a Belgian-Moroccan woman resigned from her role as a government representative at a women's equality institute following attacks from politicians on her use of the head scarf.

Following protests in universities, Belgium's Wallonia region recently lifted a ban on religious symbols at schools including higher education.

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EU: Launching the first Interactive Map on FGM Laws, Policies and Data in Europe

On Friday, 28 May 2021, International Day for Women's Health, End FGM EU launched the FGM in Europe online interactive map in a high-level launch event with European decision-makers.

Endfgm.eu (28.05.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3uKu9pp> - The event presented the map and its potential as an available and accessible resource on FGM in Europe. It also focused on specific aspects of working to address FGM in Europe. Officials from countries with

promising practices shared their knowledge during breakout sessions on “Community engagement and Protection for persons at risk of FGM” and “Funding and data collection on FGM”. You can watch the Facebook Live replay [here](#).

Chiara Cosentino, End FGM EU Head of Policy and Advocacy said “As the European umbrella organisation working on FGM, our expertise and bird's eye view of the European context is highly valued by many stakeholders. Yet, we realised that this insight was only available on demand. This is why we decided to create this resource with our members and share the richness of our collective knowledge with a wider audience.”

We hope that this map will not only serve as a source of information but also as a well of inspiration to do better and continue to improve our work to end FGM and our support of FGM Survivors. We want countries to learn from each other and strive to better their laws, policies, services and data collection efforts. We want to encourage mutual learning and cooperation towards ending FGM for All in Europe and beyond.

The End FGM EU Interactive map is now officially live! You can access it here: <https://map.endfgm.eu/map>

Background:

Between 2019 and 2020, End FGM EU conducted, together with its members, a thorough mapping around laws, policies, services and data collection in the 14 European countries where its members operate. Information has been collected systematically and homogeneously through a standard questionnaire to ensure comparability among countries and promote improvement and mutual learning at the national level. The questionnaire, developed by the End FGM EU Secretariat, has been inspired by the Sexual Rights Database project. The research has been conducted at the European level by End FGM EU and has been cross-checked and validated by national members at the country level.

The development of this online interactive map and database has been made possible by the support of the European Commission, Rights Equality and Citizenship Programme, Sigrid Rausing Trust and Wallace Global Fund.

EU: Bérengère Marques-Pereira: “Preventing women from having an abortion will question the right to health”

Newsline (16.04.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3ejcnog> - In an interview with Le Monde, the political scientist Bérengère Marques-Pereira worried about violations of abortion rights in Europe and condemned the “ethical political colonization” of the Catholic Church.

The politician and professor of the Free University of Brussels in Bérengère Marques-Pereira published the “Socio-Political Research and Information Center” (Crisp) edition Abortion in the European Union. Actors, topics and speeches. For example, in the United States, when trying to restrict, the broad panorama of controversial issues highlights the possible reversibility of the right to voluntarily terminate pregnancy (abortion).

Europe generally enjoys the right to abortion and has one of the lowest abortion rates in the world. We have witnessed some timid liberalization, but there have also been major regressions. In Poland, we are implementing a virtual ban [désormais proscrit en cas de malformation grave du fœtus, l’avortement ne reste possible qu’en cas de menace pour la vie de la femme enceinte et si la grossesse est le résultat d’un viol ou d’un inceste]. In Malta, the ban is complete.

In countries with lax laws, doctors' excessive use of conscientious objection to military service hinders abortion opportunities. This is common in Central Europe, but it is also common in Italy. The Italian Ministry of Health pointed out that 70% of doctors use the conscience clause. For example, when department heads force their employees to refuse any abortion or pre-abortion care, this is an institutionalized approach. Therefore, abortion rights are not available on 80% of Italian territory.

The administrative and legal obstacles must also be emphasized, which complicate abortion opportunities through accumulation: limited legal deadlines, mandatory and infancy reflection periods. > [en France, le délai de réflexion de sept jours a été supprimé en 2016], > Obligation to ensure women's consent-this is important, but why is there more than other medical procedures?

Finally, there are financial obstacles. The legal duration of abortion varies from one state to another (up to 12 states)E In the week most people are pregnant, but only 22 weeks in the Netherlands), women who have exceeded the number of weeks of pregnancy in their own countries/regions do not have all the means to travel abroad and to intervene abroad. The problem of access to contraception also appears upstream. Although modern contraceptives Regarded as "essential medicine" by the World Health Organization, Many European countries do not give them reimbursement, but allow minors to obtain the authorization of their parents.

EU: Istanbul Convention - Symbol of Cultural Division of Europe

Novinite (16.04.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3sOZztL> - The so called "Istanbul Convention" once seemed relatively uncontroversial: a 25-page document meant to reduce violence against women across Europe.

But a decade later, the initiative, known as the Istanbul Convention, has unexpectedly become a proxy fight for the larger culture battles brewing between East and Western Europe.

One by one, Eastern European countries are turning their back on the document, claiming it will erode their version of "family values."

Turkey, which hosted the convention that produced the document, will withdraw from the convention on July 1. Poland has signaled it is questioning the agreement. Other European countries, like Hungary, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic, signed the document, but haven't translated its provisions into law.

The backlash centers on a semantic dispute that was not the main focus for the document's authors 10 years ago: how, exactly, to define "gender." To a crop of increasingly socially conservative European leaders, the document's definition is a surreptitious means to erode distinctions between men and women and "normalize" homosexuality. To the rest, the issue is not the definition, but what they see as a politically motivated interpretation spread using disinformation.

The division is a concerning development to many European officials and women's rights advocates, raising questions about the Continent's ability to effectively protect against gender-based violence and driving a further wedge between progressive and conservative forces in Europe. In the process, they warned, women's lives are being put at risk.

"This is not just against the Istanbul Convention, it is also an anti-European, and an anti-EU gesture," said Daniel Hölting, spokesperson for the Council of Europe, the international organization of 47 European states that produced and oversees the convention. "It's traditionalists against progressives in Europe."

Hölting added: "The convention is against violence against women and nothing else."

The convention, which came into force on August 1, 2014, was initially signed by the 45 Council of Europe member countries and the EU as a bloc. After that, Turkey was the first country to ratify the convention, and 21 EU countries followed. In 2017, the EU signed the document and started working to ratify it as a bloc. In total, 34 EU and non-EU countries have ratified the convention.

The document was intended to provide the bloc and other non-EU signatories with legally binding standards to "protect women against all forms of violence," including sexual harassment, stalking and forced marriage.

At the time of its drafting, the issue was less about gender than it was about the scope of violence, said Johanna Nelles, one of the document's authors who also assisted the drafting committee in its negotiations.

"It was to what extent the convention should focus specifically against violence against women ... or whether the scope of application extended to men and boys," said Nelles, who now leads the Council of Europe's efforts to get countries to implement the text.

Nelles said the document had to define gender since it was trying to address gender-based violence. The word appears 25 times in the text and is defined as "the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men." Often, the word shows up as part of terms like "gender-based violence," "gendered understanding," "gender-sensitive" or "gender equality."

"Gender is the recognition that society subscribes us all certain roles, behaviors and activities that are considered appropriate for women and men," Nelles said, noting that "many" of these roles "contribute to the perpetration of violence."

Nelles admitted feeling surprised at the current outcry over the document in Eastern Europe, arguing the topic had been co-opted by "social movements, conservative think tanks [and] religious extremists who have a vision that doesn't comply with women's rights."

Indeed, the convention has been swept up in disinformation campaigns and used as populist propaganda.

And opposition is growing across Eastern Europe.

The EU as a whole has not ratified the text in part because six signatories — like Hungary, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic — haven't made the document's text legally binding.

EU member Poland ratified the text in 2015, but is now questioning its content under the ruling conservative Law and Justice party. Its leaders are hung up, like others, on the document's use of the word "gender." Last month, the Polish parliament's lower house voted to submit a bill called "Yes to Family, No to Gender" to parliamentary committees for examination.

The rejection has taken different forms elsewhere.

In Hungary, parliament refused to ratify the Istanbul Convention in 2020 after Viktor Orbán's government described the measure as promoting "destructive gender ideologies" and "illegal migration," according to news reports.

In Bulgaria, the constitutional court in 2018 ruled the [convention unconstitutional](#).

In Slovakia, lawmakers voted in 2019 against ratifying the convention.

But Turkey has grabbed the most attention in recent weeks after President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan pulled out of the convention by presidential decree.

"The Istanbul Convention, originally intended to promote women's rights, was hijacked by a group of people attempting to normalize homosexuality — which is incompatible with Turkey's social and family values," his office said in a statement following the announcement of Turkey's withdrawal.

The topic was top of mind for EU leaders when they traveled to Turkey this week to discuss migration and the customs union. European Council President Charles Michel and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen took the opportunity to also confront Erdoğan about his decision.

"I am deeply worried about the fact Turkey withdrew from the Istanbul Convention," von der Leyen told reporters at a press conference following her meeting with the Turkish leader. "This is about protecting women and children against violence. The EU will never hesitate to point out further negative actions."

Von der Leyen's comments reflected the growing fears in Brussels and at the Council of Europe's headquarters in Strasbourg that other skeptics could follow Turkey's lead and withdraw fully, further derailing the EU's effort to ratify the convention as a bloc — an endeavor that is already on the rocks.

Council of Europe officials and gender equality experts argue the Istanbul Convention has nothing to do with homosexuality. In many countries, they note, the document has served as a model to better define gender-based violence, increase financing to support victims and set up help lines and shelters. Such efforts have been especially important during the pandemic, when domestic violence has surged.

"In Sweden, following the entry into force of the consent-based legislation on sexual violence, the number of prosecutions have gone up because many cases that used to be disqualified as rape can now be prosecuted," said Marceline Naudi, who chairs the Council of Europe's expert body that monitors the convention, during a recent online conference on the issue.

"This demonstrates both the transformative momentum created by the Istanbul Convention as much as the high degree of engagement among state parties," Naudi added.

Still, the EU is making alternate plans, sensing it may never be able to ratify the Istanbul Convention as a bloc. The European Commission recently announced it would launch a new legislative proposal to "combat gender-based violence" by the end of the year. The EU could then, potentially, adopt the new legally-binding text via qualified majority, avoiding the need for unanimous approval.

EU: Pay transparency directive – a milestone in closing the gender pay gap?

European Women's Lobby (19.03.2021) - <https://bit.ly/39VC8IS> - The European Women's Lobby (EWL) welcomes the recently adopted legislative proposal on pay transparency by the European Commission, which has been long overdue. While there are many positive measures in the proposal including a definition of 'work of equal value', the EWL regrets that mandatory reporting on the gender pay gap only concerns companies with 250 workers, which excludes many sectors where women work, particularly in Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs).

We welcome the measures to facilitate the right of workers to access information to assess whether they are being discriminated against in comparison with other workers in a similar position. The EWL particularly welcomes reference to the concept of 'work of equal value', which provides some clarity in order to define how this can be established within companies and especially across sectors. Furthermore, we welcome measures calling for 'gender neutral objective criteria' to compare and determine the value of work. It is crucial that this includes people-related skills and responsibilities in establishing this criteria and ultimately in the transposition of the directive.

This is crucial to close gender gaps in the labour-market which remains highly gender-segregated and in which women are concentrated in a limited number of specific people-centred sectors, such as health, care, education, retail, - sectors that are characterised by poor pay, less favourable working conditions and high levels of part-time work. As such, this new legislative proposal must complement the legal framework on part time work concluded by the Social Partners in 1997 1, which clearly states that part-time work should be 'voluntary', 'non-discriminatory' with no 'less favourable conditions', and provide the possibility to 'transfer from/back to full-time/part-time'. In line with the measures outlined in the pay transparency legislative proposal, it is urgent to monitor the application of the part time work framework, to ensure that wages are in line with the full time equivalent to address the gender pay gap in part time occupations.

For the EWL, the proposed directive is an important milestone in closing the gender pay gap and in particular in recognising the intersectional axes of discrimination on the basis of sex, ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation. However, the EWL questions whether this legal instrument is enough to address the long-term persistent and structural dimensions of inequality between women and men, which are related to gender stereotypes and mirrored in the labour-market. Pay transparency alone will not address the deep-rooted gender inequalities, but it is a first step in the right direction. An encompassing legislative and policy framework at EU level is necessary to close the gender pay gap, and address the gender lifelong earnings, pension and subsequent poverty gaps.

Additional necessary measures include mandatory pay audits in all companies, regardless of the size of the workforce. Women working in SMEs and/or smaller structures where neither human resources and/or trade unions are present should also be able to provide mandatory pay audits and receive technical support to do this. All companies should establish mandatory gender action plans, including transparency in pay composition and other measures to address the gender pay gap and that is monitored annually.

EU: More equal sharing of care would reduce workplace gender inequality

There is a direct link between the unequal division of un-paid care in households and gender inequality in the labour market, according to a study by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE).

EIGE (03.12.2020) - <https://bit.ly/33TjTRb> - Across the EU, the bulk of unpaid care work is done by women, with 92 % providing un-paid care several days a week – as opposed to 68 % of men. Employed women also do more than their fair share of unpaid care work. Across the EU, they spend 90 minutes more per day than employed men on unpaid care.

‘The benefits of dividing care work more evenly are clear. Countries with a more equal sharing of unpaid care between women and men, tend to have higher employment rates for women and lower gender gaps in earnings,’ said Carlien Scheele, EIGE’s Director.

Balancing the care gap

An unequal sharing of care limits women’s job prospects and is a major reason behind the gender pay gap. One way to balance the uneven sharing of unpaid care work is through the use of childcare services. EIGE’s research shows that childcare services lead to higher financial returns for women, compared to men. Women with children under 12 years using childcare services at least 14 hours a week are estimated to earn 4.8 % more on an hourly basis, compared to women who do not outsource childcare. The estimated difference for men is 2.6 %. Yet 14 % of households across the EU report unmet needs for childcare services. For half of them, it’s because of the unaffordable cost.

Gender inequality in the paid care sector

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of care for a well-functioning society and economy. Yet the assumption that caring is still women’s work, even when paid, contributes to its undervaluation. Currently, women make up 37 million of the 49 million care workers in the EU. Many find themselves in low paid, temporary jobs, with little career prospects.

What needs to change?

For a fairer distribution of unpaid care, we need a dual approach that would support both an equal sharing of care at the family level and accessible, quality care services. First, we need changes at the household level, so that an equal sharing of care tasks between women and men becomes the norm. Second, it is important that people have access to affordable, professional care services that can help tackle the rising care needs expected in the EU as the population ages.

Background

The forthcoming report ‘Gender inequalities in care and consequences for the labour market’ is part of EIGE’s work on monitoring the EU’s progress towards its gender equality commitments under the Beijing Platform for Action. It was prepared at the request of the German Presidency of the Council of the European Union. The finalised report will be published on EIGE’s website in January 2021.

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EU: Europe's thermonuclear debate on privacy and child sexual abuse

Everyone from Ashton Kutcher to Australia's eSafety commissioner has weighed in.

By Nicholas Vinocur

POLITICO (20.11.2020) - <https://politi.co/39iu8BQ> - Should platforms like Facebook and Instagram be able to scan for evidence of child sexual abuse and grooming online?

That question is at the heart of an explosive debate in Europe about online privacy that has roped in everyone from actor-turned-tech investor Ashton Kutcher to the EU's top privacy regulator and observers as far afield as Australia.

On one side there is the EU's executive branch and its defenders, including Kutcher, who want such automatic scanning to continue. They argue that the scanning tools don't infringe upon privacy because the algorithms don't "understand" the content; such tools flag it for human review if it matches a digital ID for child pornography, or hits certain keywords.

On the other side, there are privacy activists, EU lawmakers and the bloc's top privacy regulator, who say that automatic scanning — particularly of text exchanges — is a major infringement of people's fundamental right to privacy: Even if its intent is limited, it still opens the door to abuse because the practice has no clear legal basis.

In a November 11 opinion, the European Data Protection Supervisor blasted a Commission proposal that would allow the scanning as contrary to EU privacy rules. And the Parliament's rapporteur on the draft law, Birgit Sippel, has voiced concern, saying Parliament is unlikely to meet a December 21 deadline to pass the derogation into law.

Now Ylva Johansson, the EU's home affairs commissioner who is behind the derogation initiative, is pushing back — with unexpected support from Kutcher, who co-founded an organization called Thorn in the U.S. to combat child sex trafficking and abuse. In an interview with POLITICO, she said the European Data Protection Supervisor (EDPS) Wojciech Wiewiórowski — who's in charge of policing EU institutions — had ignored children's well-being.

"What I'm criticizing is that the EDPS are only talking about the privacy of the users. But there is also the privacy of the children, the abused children who are the subject of illegal content ... The EDPS left that whole angle out," she said.

"I had expected the EDPS to help us with that. Instead, he [Wiewiórowski] acted a bit blind in one eye, not seeing there is a huge infringement of the fundamental rights of those children. You have to realize there is a balance to find, and not only to protect the rights of the users."

'Growing' problem

Johansson's comments come as the clock is ticking down on a deal within EU institutions. If lawmakers can't agree on Johansson's draft law, platforms will face new privacy rules

without an exemption for child sexual abuse material — rendering the automatic scanning illegal.

But the Swedish commissioner argued that it was urgent to give them a chance to carry on the practice, which she says is already in use to detect copyright-infringing material.

According to the head of Europol, who spoke to POLITICO in March, there has been a substantial increase in examples of child exploitation online during the pandemic because kids are spending more time on their phones and computers during lockdown.

Johansson said that trend hasn't let up: "There are a lot of signs that child exploitation, especially online, is growing." She added that her office planned to propose permanent legislation to combat child sexual abuse online next year, but that in the meantime platforms needed a legal means to keep detecting the illegal content.

"That's what I hope now: that Parliament will not follow the draft from the rapporteur [which watered down Johansson's proposal] and rather opt for an opinion that is much closer to the [Commission's] proposal," she said.

With emotions running high on either side of the debate, the issue of automatic scanning has drawn attention far beyond the bloc.

Australia's eSafety commissioner, tasked with protecting people online, has written to the Parliament's civil liberties committee, which has the lead on the file, advocating for Johansson's proposal. And Ashton Kutcher — who played bumbling teen heartthrob Michael Kelso in the U.S. sitcom "That '70s Show," and has since remade himself as a tech investor — has thrown himself into the mix, including by tweeting at EU lawmakers.

"Time is running out to ensure a proactive and voluntary online child abuse detection methods are preserved in the #EU," he tweeted on Wednesday.

Kutcher's star power has opened doors. Last week, he scored a videoconference with Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, and Johansson cited him as proof that the scanning issue was one of global importance.

Is this legal?

But the other camp bristles at the outside interventions and time pressure. Not only are defenders of the derogation oversimplifying the issue, they argue, but they run the risk of creating a precedent that will allow platforms to flag and remove all manner of content, some of it harmless, without any solid legal grounding.

Rather than opposing a clampdown on online child sexual abuse, they favor an approach they say would be more in line with the bloc's privacy rulebook, the General Data Protection Regulation. Sippel, for instance, objects to the part of Johansson's draft law that pertains to child grooming — i.e., text or audio communication — not the part that pertains to child pornography, which she wants more clearly defined.

The Commission "does not wish to take a stance on whether current voluntary practices to detect and report child sexual abuse material are in fact legal under EU law," Sippel said in her draft report on Johansson's proposal.

The Commission wants its proposal to be finalized by December 21, but some lawmakers dismissed the deadline as artificial, since scanning would not stop overnight without the derogation.

But David Lega, who heads a Parliament group on children's rights, says a deal is not only necessary but possible within the time limit.

"I think it [the deadline] could be met and I hope that it will be," he said. "There is time both procedurally and legally to do this now."

The derogation is meant to apply until the European Commission presents a fully fledged piece of legislation on the fight against sexual abuse online next year.

EU: Covid-19 wave of violence against women shows EU countries still lack proper safeguards

Lockdowns to contain the coronavirus led to spikes in domestic violence reports. In two new studies, the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) assesses the measures each EU country took to protect women during the pandemic and shows how governments can amplify the role of people witnessing violence.

EIGE (18.11.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3q7Xlpo> - "Women usually face the most danger from people they know. EIGE's research shows EU governments recognise this: every single country has introduced special measures to protect women from intimate partner violence during the pandemic. Yet persistent under-funding of shelters and domestic violence hotlines has resulted in sometimes patchy support," said Carlien Scheele, EIGE's Director in the lead up to the international day to eliminate violence against women.

National action plans

Ireland, Spain and Lithuania have launched national action plans to eradicate intimate partner violence during the pandemic. Spain has strengthened coordination among its health, police and justice services, as has Lithuania. Ireland has gone further by putting €160,000 on the table. With that money, the government has helped shelters and hotlines for victims adapt to new remote working conditions. Irish courts have prioritised domestic violence cases and expanded remote hearings. The police are checking up on women who have faced violence in the past.

Legislation

Several countries have adapted legislation to declare shelters and hotlines "essential services" to keep them accessible at all times. In Latvia, Estonia, Slovakia and France, legislation now obliges governments to provide women facing violence at home with alternative accommodation. Estonian courts have been empowered to issue temporary restraining orders against violent partners, protecting the victim from homelessness and pinning accountability on the abuser.

Awareness raising campaigns

Almost every EU country rolled out awareness raising campaigns to let victims know about the help available. Greece, Finland and Portugal addressed refugees and migrants, while other countries reached out to women from Roma communities, LGBTIQ+ women, or those with hearing impairments. Spain's campaign emphasised that domestic violence is a human rights violation -- not a private issue.

Awareness campaigns are important for witnesses, who can fail to intervene because they might not recognise intimate partner violence when they see it. Campaigns also

provide clear guidance on how witnesses can help when they fear they will make the situation worse. Around 20–30 % of calls to domestic violence hotlines come from witnesses -- they ought to be reassured and guided through this daunting process. EIGE's research shows witnesses often want to help in ways aside from reporting to the police, for example by talking to the victim or helping them access support services. Guidance on such ways to help should also be part of campaigns.

Shelter and counselling staff

As EU countries re-enter lockdowns, governments can learn from the positive action taken during the first wave of the pandemic -- as well as the shortcomings. Shelter and counselling staff were overwhelmed with increased demand and heightened distress of victims; they felt unprepared to provide remote support and worried about victim confidentiality. There was not enough personal protective equipment to continue helping victims face-to-face.

Shaky support systems

In the majority of EU countries, the pandemic exposed overall shaky support systems for victims of gender-based violence. A lack of funding and shelter space resulted in women being put up in hotels and privately provided Airbnbs. While quick action is laudable, fire fighting measures delivered by the private sector should not be the solution to save lives. Although natural disasters and pandemics lead to surges in violence against women globally, no EU Member State had a disaster plan in place to deal with this.

Covid-19 has shone a harsh light on how unprepared societies often are to protect victims of intimate partner violence. Government must not turn a blind eye.

EU: Online child sex abuse rises with COVID-19 lockdowns -Europol

Sexual abusers are trying to exploit children's growing exposure to the internet during the pandemic.

By Francesco Guarascio & Nick Macfie

Thomson Reuters Foundation (18.05.2020) - <https://tmsnrt.rs/2LIXRHq> - Online sex abuse of children in the European Union has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, the head of EU law enforcement agency Europol said on Monday, warning that more cases could emerge when schools reopen as teachers' monitoring resumes.

Cybercrime has spiked during the epidemic with many people forced to work and shop online.

"What is most worrying is the increased online activity by those seeking child sexual abuse material," Europol director Catherine De Bolle told a hearing in the EU Parliament.

De Bolle, a former head of the Belgian police, said the rise in paedophile activities was reported by national law enforcement authorities from the 27 EU states who saw higher access to illegal websites and shut more online platforms for the exchange of child sex material.

She said that Europol investigators had also intercepted offenders claiming easier access to children in conversations on the dark web, a part of the internet which is accessible only with specific software or authorisation.

Sexual abusers are trying to exploit children's growing exposure to the web, as throughout lockdowns they turn to online lessons, sometimes through platforms that are not adequately secured, De Bolle said.

"We expect to have more and a better view on the situation when children will be able to go to school again and they will have the possibility to talk to teachers," De Bolle told lawmakers.

In many European countries, schools are still shut to contain the pandemic.

Hot lines for reporting abuse also received more calls as children were locked down, De Bolle said. In March, these alerts rose in Spain to a record level for that period of the year, a Europol report showed.

"Using the internet to sexually exploit children today is easier than ever," said ECPAT, a network of civil society organisations against the commercial sexual exploitation of children.

It said that it was now simpler for paedophiles to get in contact with children and to find like-minded offenders, "which also makes it easier to access, download, produce and share child sexual abuse material".

EU: COVID-19: Stopping the rise in domestic violence during lockdown

Cases of domestic violence rose by a third in some EU countries following lockdown; member states should provide victims with flexible tools to report abuse; places in violence protection facilities and shelters must be increased; women will be hit much harder by the post-coronavirus economic crisis.

European Parliament (07.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3eiMcMx> - Women's Rights committee Chair, Evelyn Regner, urges the EU and member states to increase support to victims of domestic violence during the COVID-19 crisis.

Both globally and in some EU countries, it has been reported that cases of domestic violence rose by a third in the week after lockdown was put in place. Women in violent relationships are stuck at home and exposed to their abuser for longer periods of time. This makes it very difficult for them to call helplines, as the perpetrator is always around.

Reacting to this situation, Evelyn Regner (S&D, AT), Chair of the EP Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality, declared: "These days and the weeks ahead are especially dangerous for women. We are all facing major psychological challenges through isolation or quarantine, but women and sometimes children in unsafe homes are facing a particularly gruelling stress test. We, therefore, must now pay particular attention to this issue and expand our actions to stop violence against women."

"We won't leave Europe's women alone"

"I urge all EU member states to tackle this problem with determination and to communicate actively where and how those affected can get help. This must also include

simple ways to contact and to alert the police, such as text messages or online chats, and the use of code words with doctors or pharmacists. In addition, more places in violence protection facilities and women's shelters must be made available. Wherever possible, the EU must support member states' measures financially and by helping them to communicate about these measures", she added.

"The COVID-19 pandemic starkly highlights gender inequality in all its shapes and forms. As OECD figures show, 70% of the health care workforce are women, a large part of unpaid care work is done by women and the upcoming economic crisis will hit women much harder. It is our job to sustainably strengthen the physical and mental health of women and their economic independence, beyond the COVID-19 crisis. We will certainly not leave Europe's women alone", she concluded.

EU: Coronavirus puts women in the frontline

EIGE (25.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2R0DBUz> - In Europe, we are all adjusting to new ways of living because of the effects of the coronavirus. We are learning what it means to self-quarantine, work from home, home-school children, lose a job or even a loved one. Each person's situation is different, but for sure, the coronavirus will reveal the different realities of women and men.

At the frontline of this coronavirus pandemic are the healthcare workers who are working around the clock and putting themselves at risk to care for patients. Most of the nurses and healthcare workers in the EU are women. Their workload is very demanding, often taking an emotional toll. Yet their profession is one of the most undervalued, and underpaid jobs in the EU.

Men's mortality rate is higher

Preliminary figures show that women and men are being infected by the coronavirus in about equal numbers, but the mortality rate is higher for men than for women [1]. The World Health Organization recommends to keep up healthy food and exercise habits to boost the immune system and avoid unhealthy ones such as smoking and consuming excessive alcohol. More men smoke than women and are therefore more likely to be at risk of developing a serious disease if infected with the virus.

Extra challenges for public transport users

Our Gender Equality Index findings show that women rely much more on public transportation than men. This puts women at greater risk of coming into contact with the virus, when they have to either get to work, visit a doctor or do the grocery shopping. This is especially the case with single parents, who are less likely to have a car due to financial reasons. 18 % of them say that public transport is the only method of transport available to them. In countries where restrictions on movement have tightened, public transport has been reduced or even shut down. This makes life more difficult for people who rely on these services and still need to get to work, visit a doctor or do the grocery shopping

Concern for severe job losses in women-dominated professions

The closure or near-closure of many businesses could have a severe effect on many women-dominated professions. Flight attendants, tour operators, sales assistants, hotel cleaners and hairdressers are often already in precarious jobs and will probably not be paid nor entitled to paid sick leave. These people are likely to have difficulty paying for basic necessities such as groceries, rent and bills in the coming days and months. EIGE's

research shows that a quarter of women employees across the EU are in a precarious job. For migrants, the situation is even worse. Nearly one in three non-EU born women (35 %) and one in four men (24 %) work in precarious jobs.

Unpaid care work will increase

Even without a crisis, caring responsibilities usually fall heavily on women. Now with the closure of schools and workplaces, their unpaid workload is likely to further increase. If older relatives get sick, they will also need looking after. The situation for single parents can be even more difficult, especially when options for informal childcare are unavailable.

Physical distancing is not an option for everyone

In the EU, nearly a quarter of households depend on informal care from relatives or friends. As physical distancing and confinement measures become the norm, it will become harder for family, friends and neighbours to provide or receive such care.

There are also many people in our society, for whom physical distancing is not an option. We have 61 million women and 47 million men with disabilities in the EU. Many of them depend on help from others to eat, dress or shower, which makes physical distancing almost impossible. Across the EU, most of the professional carers working with people with disabilities or older people are women (83 %).

Domestic abuse increases in times of crisis

These times of social isolation increase the risk of domestic abuse. Women in violent relationships are stuck at home and exposed to their abuser for longer periods of time. This makes it very difficult for them to call helplines as the perpetrator is always around. It can also be harder for women to leave their abuser once the crisis is over, due to the financial insecurity that might follow.

Neighbours or relatives can have an important role in contacting the police if they suspect that violence is occurring, especially when the victim is not able to call for help.

Where are women decision-makers?

While nurses are working non-stop behind the scenes in hospitals to look after patients, we mostly see men out in the public domain, making the news headlines. They are the ones who hold most of the positions of power in our society. In this crisis, it is usually men who are making all the important decisions, which affect the everyday lives of citizens. This imbalance of decision-making power means that women are left out from shaping the decisions that affect their own lives.

Policy measures must consider the different needs of women and men

The response from policymakers must consider the different experiences faced by women and men during a pandemic to ensure that everyone gets the help they most need. There is a big need for sex-disaggregated data to fully understand how women and men are affected by the virus. Not only for infection rates, but also the economic impacts, the distribution of care work and the extent of domestic violence. It is also time for leaders to recognise and give more value to the important work done by those who are in the frontlines of a health crisis, such as healthcare workers, home carers and domestic workers.

EU: Women's rights: MEPs call for action to fight backlash against gender equality

MEPs set their priorities for the upcoming UN Commission on the Status of Women and call for the EU to take strong action against all measures undermining women's rights.

European Parliament News (13.02.2020) - <https://bit.ly/37Fx2w4> - Ahead of the 64th UN Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW64) in New York in March, Parliament spelled out its priorities on Thursday.

In a resolution adopted by 463 votes in favour, 108 against and 50 abstentions, MEPs deplore that many of the challenges identified by the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action 25 years ago are still relevant today.

They call on the Council to ensure a unified EU position and act to counter the backlash against gender equality and all measures undermining women's rights.

Setting out their priorities for the upcoming UNCSW session in March, MEPs call for measures boosting women's economic and political empowerment:

- greater inclusion of women in the labour market;
- more support for female entrepreneurship;
- close the gender pay gap (16%) and pension gap (37%);
- favour domestic and care responsibilities being shared equally;
- promote education for girls and encourage greater participation in STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) careers;
- promote gender-balanced representation at all levels of decision-making, and
- unblock the "Women on Boards Directive" in the Council.

To step up protection of women, the EU should:

- urgently conclude the EU ratification of the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women;
- allocate adequate resources to combat gender-based violence and protect victims, and
- protect and promote the rights of groups experiencing multiple and intersectional forms of discrimination, e.g. women with disabilities, women of colour, migrant women and LGBTIQ people.

The EU must act globally by:

- promoting and supporting the inclusion of a specific gender chapter in all future EU trade and investment agreements;
- condemning the US 'global gag' rule, which cuts US funding for international organisations if they provide or lobby for abortion services;
- significantly supporting funding for sexual and reproductive health and rights, and
- promoting greater participation of women in climate action, peacekeeping, peacebuilding and mediation processes.

Background

The Beijing Declaration was adopted by the UN at the end of the 4th World Conference on Women on 15 September 1995 to promulgate a set of principles on the equality of men and women. The Platform for Action called for strategic actions in areas such as economy, education, health, violence and decision-making.

EU: MEP Assita Kanko: We are determined to put an end to Female Genital Mutilation

The European Parliament has approved a common resolution on a strategy to end the practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) around the world, tabled by six political groups.

ECR Group (12.02.2020) - <https://bit.ly/39KtgTQ> - Speaking after the vote, ECR MEP and vocal campaigner for ending FGM Assita Kanko, who had the initiative to table the resolution, said:

"The European Parliament has today proved that certain issues go beyond political games. There is general consensus that we need to eliminate FGM. No less than 200 million girls and women today have to live with the often terrible consequences of their genital mutilation.

"Female Genital Mutilation is not only an African issue, far from it. All girls and women must have the opportunity to choose their own future.

"Through practical training, cooperation, information sharing, international diplomacy, and crucially through showing zero tolerance, the EU should aim to solve this issue at all levels of society.

"It takes a lot of courage to break a taboo. There must be zero tolerance when it comes to the practice of Female Genital Mutilation. It is a crime against your body, your mind, and your physical autonomy."

As a young girl, Kanko herself became a victim of genital mutilation in her country of birth, Burkina Faso. She is also calling for support for survivors of this practice.

EU: New study published: Gender-based asylum claims and non-refoulement: Articles 60 and 61 of the Istanbul Convention

Council of Europe (10.02.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2HzN6Fc> - A new publication is now available on [Gender-based asylum claims and non-refoulement: Articles 60 and 61 of the Istanbul Convention](#). This publication belongs to a series of in-depth analyses of articles of the Convention on preventing and combatting violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention).

The series includes analyses of Articles 11 (ensuring data collection and research on violence against women and domestic violence), 12 (preventing violence against women), 13 (raising awareness of violence against women), 16 (domestic and sexual violence perpetrator programmes) and 17 (encouraging the participation of the private sector and the media in the prevention of violence against women and domestic violence), and a collection of papers on Article 52 aimed at facilitating the implementation of articles of the Istanbul Convention.

Articles 60 and 61 of the Istanbul Convention concern gender-based asylum claims and non-refoulement, respectively. The purpose of this publication is to support the

implementation of these articles by providing policy makers, border and immigration officials and practitioners with practical advice including definitions, information and examples of: gender-based violence that may be recognised as forms of persecution or other serious harm, how to ensure that a gender-sensitive interpretation is given to each of the convention grounds, what are the requirements of gender-sensitive reception procedures and gender-sensitive practice and procedure in respect of refugee status determination, and applications for other forms of international protection. It discusses the additional protection of the non-refoulement principle and concludes with a checklist which summarises the requirements of the provisions affecting asylum-seeking and refugee women in Articles 60 and 61 of the Istanbul Convention.

The checklist should help in designing and implementing measures in law, policy and practice to implement Articles 60 and 61.

EUROPE: Sex workers at a coronavirus crossroads

The pandemic has been tough for many sex workers, and the end of lockdown brings new challenges.

By Eline Schaart & Nektaria Stamouli

Politico (16.06.2020) - <https://politi.co/3g0aaMi> - Sex workers are faced with a dilemma: open for business and risk getting coronavirus, or face having no income.

The pandemic has laid bare the legal limbo in which most sex workers operate in Europe, with many unable to access state support. During the lockdown, that meant either no money or breaking the rules and carrying on working — adding an extra layer of risk to what for many is already a dangerous job.

Now countries are beginning to open up. Belgium was one of the first to allow brothels to restart work, on June 8, even though saunas and massage parlors must remain closed until July 1. Customers' temperatures are checked upon arrival and both partners have to wear a face mask.

In Belgium — where there's no legal framework to protect sex workers, but most local authorities tolerate it — only those registered as self-employed have been able to get compensation. That means many people were forced to return to work, according to UTSOPI, which represents sex workers in Belgium, because "they don't have a choice" due to their financial situation.

Hot Marijke, a sex worker in Flanders, has been getting state support but says she will lose it now that brothels are back open. "They are basically forcing me back to work," she said over the phone. "It's madness, you cannot touch your friends but you can climb into bed with a wild stranger."

"The pandemic has been very dramatic for all sex workers — due to their lack of legal status in many countries they are being completely excluded from emergency measures," said Luca Stevenson, coordinator at the International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe (ICRSE), which includes more than 100 organizations.

In Greece, brothels reopened on Monday, with authorities issuing a long list of hygiene rules, which brothel owners and sex workers fear will be a deterrent to customers.

They include an obligation to keep all clients' contact details in a sealed envelope for four weeks for tracking and tracing purposes; that services should not exceed 15 minutes per

customer; and only one customer at a time. Sex workers have also been told to "ensure distance," which will likely prove rather difficult, and avoid "face-to-face contact."

Greek law does not allow sex workers to register as self-employed and therefore take advantage of state support. That means, according to Red Umbrella Athens, an initiative supporting sex workers, that more than 600 brothels operate illegally in Greece — with the authorities turning a blind eye — and hundreds of sex workers are out looking for customers on the streets. According to officials at the Greek Ministry of Civil Protection and the Municipalities, they are beginning to register the hundreds of illegal brothels, with the aim of making them legal.

Red lights are off in Amsterdam

In the Netherlands, there are calls for the government to open up the industry as soon as possible. "We are fully prepared and could open tomorrow," said Yvette Luhrs, a spokesperson at the Prostitution Information Center who also works in pornography.

Yet under current plans from the government, the windows in De Wallen, Amsterdam's main red light district, will remain empty until September 1.

"Our hygiene rules were already extremely tight and now, taking into account the coronavirus protocols, [are] even more strict," Luhrs said. The guidelines "go much further than those in Belgium."

Although prostitution in the Netherlands is legal, many sex workers are in limbo. Like many governments at the start of the crisis, the Dutch set up an emergency income fund for those left without work. But in practice, many sex workers do not qualify for the subsidies because of the way they were registered with the tax authorities before the crisis began.

Luhrs said that without the necessary financial compensation, many sex workers and their families have found themselves in dire situations. "We've been working for weeks on a protocol and we've sent letters to the government demanding to be treated like other contact professions, such as tattoo artists and hairdressers, but so far The Hague has stayed quiet."

In a survey of more than 100 sex workers in the Netherlands conducted by Sekswerk Expertise, a research group in Amsterdam, more than half of respondents said they had applied for coronavirus support. Of those, only 13 percent said they had received help. Of those who did not apply, around 1 in 3 said they already knew they would not qualify, and 1 in 6 said they were worried about identifying themselves as sex workers to the government, in case that information was leaked.

A new emergency fund has been set up by volunteers, which offers aid of about €40 to the most desperate applicants.

Researchers from across Europe — including in Belgium, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and France — found that many sex workers continued to work during lockdown to make ends meet, putting them at risk from abusive clients as well as coronavirus.

"Some [sex workers] rely on seeing one or two regular customers ... which covers their fixed costs," said Luhrs. "But we also hear from people who have to look for new clients, which is more dangerous because people with bad intentions know that sex workers cannot go to the police if something happens, because then you end up with a criminal record."

Pierrette Pape, who heads Isala, an association that provides support for sex workers, said there's been a lack of "deep reflection" on the fact that many sex workers "are foreigners, victims of trafficking, exploitation or precariousness," adding that between 80 and 90 percent of sex workers are part of a trafficking network.

"Nothing will really change if another lockdown is put in place [due to a second wave of coronavirus], and these people will still face [the same] big social and financial problems," Pape said. "Let us give them a residence permit, a work permit and financial assistance to survive, and then they will see what they decide to do — but we need a long-term vision."

EUROPE: Sex workers struggle to survive Covid-19 pandemic

Criminalization makes a bad situation worse.

By Skye Wheeler

HRW (04.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3dJeVsu> - Covid-19 presents a new problem for sex workers. In-person sex work is intimate by its very nature, and workers are at heightened risk of contracting the virus if they keep working. But without work, as strip clubs close and clients dwindle, sex workers struggle to survive.

In many countries in Europe, sex work is criminalized directly or indirectly through legal systems such as the "Scandinavian model," which makes buying sex illegal. Sex workers, who are forced to work in the informal economy, find themselves excluded from emergency assistance available to other workers.

A [new report](#) by the International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe (ICRSWE) notes that sex workers in the continent live in the "economic margins" and often have less savings and government support to fall back on. They are also rarely benefitting from pandemic response and recovery plans."

Sex workers are often from groups that are already marginalized economically and socially, such as undocumented migrants, people of color, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, some of whom have been pushed out of their families due to homophobia. Sex work may, for them, be one option among bad ones. The ICRSWE report also predicts that hard economic times may mean more people will turn to sex work.

The report asks European governments to issue urgent moratoriums on raids, arrests, and prosecutions for sex work, provide financial support to sex workers, and ensure sex worker-led organizations are included in distribution of emergency assistance.

In the longer term, as the ICRSWE argues, governments should carry out meaningful consultations with sex workers to establish a framework that "respects their human rights and improves their safety and working conditions."

States that criminalize sex work should work towards decriminalization. Human Rights Watch has documented the harmful impact of laws criminalizing sex work in countries including South Africa, Tanzania, and the United States. We call for decriminalization of sex work everywhere because, as this new report says, decriminalization helps protect sex workers from violence and is an important step towards ending harmful stigmatization.

FRANCE: Frenchwoman shot, burnt alive by husband near Bordeaux

France 24 (05.05.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3h3wubX> - A 31-year-old French mother of three was burned alive by her husband, who chased her down the street and shot her in the legs before dousing her in a flammable liquid and setting her alight, police said Wednesday.

The grisly attack took place in broad daylight Tuesday in the well heeled [Merignac](#) neighbourhood, near [Bordeaux](#) airport, in the southwest.

The [woman](#) and the 44-year-old man were separated. Their children aged three, seven and 11 lived with their mother.

The man fired several shots at the woman as she fled down a street, hitting her in the legs. After she collapsed, he set her alight, police said.

He was arrested half an hour after the murder in the neighbouring district of Pessac, armed with a pistol, a pellet gun and a cartridge belt, the Bordeaux prosecutor's office said.

He is suspected both of his wife's murder and of having started fire that damaged her home.

Local authorities have set up a counselling service for witnesses to the killing. The couple's children were not at home at the time of the attack, the prosecutor's office said, adding that they were receiving trauma counselling.

The issue of [domestic violence and killings sparked protests in France in 2019](#). Campaigners complained that women who attempted to report abusive partners to the police were often being turned away.

That year saw 146 women reported killed by a spouse or partner, a 21-percent increase on the previous year.

After an outcry, the government introduced the [use of electronic bracelets to alert victims](#) when their attackers are nearby.

In 2020, [the number of killings fell to 90](#).

HRWF additional information

On 6 May, the Prosecutor in charge of the case met with the press and released a number of additional details.

The victim is identified as Chahinez D. She was 13 years younger than her husband, her assassin. They first met in Algeria and she came to France in 2015. One year later she gave birth to a child. She already had two children, born in Algeria.

The murderer, Mounir B., was born in Algeria in 1976. He has double citizenship, Algerian and French. During a first marriage, he got three children now aged 20, 18 and 11 years.

He divorced in 2015. He has had a regular job as a mason for 20 years. He has a criminal record with seven condemnations, including the last one for domestic violence against Chahinez D. in 2020. He was then sentenced to 18 months in prison, nine of which were suspended, and after six months, he was released for good behaviour during his detention.

They were officially separated and when he was released, he was not allowed to approach her any more. However, he did not respect this prohibition on several occasions. When summoned by some judicial authorities, he recognized these breaches of the agreement but remained unpunished and was not obliged to wear an electronic bracelet.

The Prosecutor specified that the family of the murderer did not want his name to be released publicly because they had already received threats on social media.

GREECE: Greek parliament elects country's first female president

MPs overwhelmingly back Katerina Sakellariopoulou's appointment with PM hailing it as 'a window to the future.'

By Helena Smith

The Guardian (22.01.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2RAr7Ue> - A high court judge and ardent human rights advocate has been elected Greece's first female president in a historic vote by parliament.

Inaugurating a new era for one of Europe's more traditional nations, MPs overwhelmingly endorsed the nomination of Katerina Sakellariopoulou as head of state. No woman has held the post in the nearly 200 years since Greece proclaimed independence. "Today a window to the future has opened," said the prime minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, after 261 deputies in the 300-seat House voted in favour of the French-educated jurist assuming the role. "Our country enters the third decade of the 21st century with more optimism."

The election – less than a week after the centre-right leader proposed Sakellariopoulou – not only breaks with tradition in an EU state where few women hold political positions but has taken many in Mitsotakis' own New Democracy party aback.

The 63-year-old, who first made history fifteen months ago when she was elevated to the helm of the highest court in the land by the leftist administration then in power, holds liberal views with an emphasis on environmental protection. But with no known party allegiance she is a political outsider.

The diminutive Sakellariopoulou cut a defiantly modernist figure as she officially accepted her appointment by a cross-party group of mostly male MPs headed by the president of the parliament in her office on Wednesday. Signalling her determination to act as a moral compass in a society often riven by political division, and singling out the climate emergency among the global challenges facing the country, she told the delegation: "I look forward to a society which respects rights ... heals the wounds of the past and looks with optimism at the future."

Her election was immediately applauded by the EU commission chief, Ursula von der Leyen, in a tweet praising Greece for "moving ahead into a new era of equality".

An expert in environmental and constitutional law, Sakellaropoulou will take the oath of office on 13 March, when she will formally succeed Prokopis Pavlopoulos, a former conservative minister who has held the largely ceremonial position for the past five years.

Raised in Thessaloniki, Greece's northern metropolis, she is the daughter of a supreme court judge and lives in a part of central Athens eschewed by most politicians.

Worldly and well read, her career has been defined at the vanguard of a minority of jurists unafraid to clash with prevailing sentiment in pursuit of the rule of law. Despite nationalist frenzy two decades ago she stood her ground as a leading proponent of removing religious affiliation from civilian identity cards, a reform demanded by the EU but vigorously opposed at the time by conservatives and the country's powerful Orthodox church. In a nation on the forefront of the refugee crisis, Sakellaropoulou has also supported citizenship being granted to migrant children.

As Greece enters 2020 after a decade of battling its worst economic crisis in modern times, the appointment of a woman to the country's highest office has raised hopes that a new page is finally being turned.

Greek female MPs voiced optimism that the president-elect could serve as a role model to younger generations in a nation still getting to grips with the idea of gender equality.

A mere five women currently hold cabinet positions – a scarcity that earned Mitsotakis wide criticism when his government assumed power in July.

Despite protests from some in the opposition that Sakellaropoulou lacked political clout, the rare consensus with which MPs supported her nomination in the first round of what could have been a five-round vote buttressed optimism on Wednesday.

In the past the failure of parliament to elect a president had frequently fuelled dissent, triggering early elections that have spurred further political tumult.

IRELAND to lay bare scandal of baby deaths at Church-run homes

Relatives have alleged the babies at mother and baby homes were mistreated because they were born to unmarried women.

Al Jazeera (12.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3i783Zv> - One of the Catholic Church's darkest chapters will be revisited on Tuesday when an Irish inquiry into death rates among newborns at church-run homes for unwed mothers hands down its final report.

Relatives have alleged the babies at the mother and baby homes were mistreated because they were born to unmarried women who, like their children, were seen as a stain on Ireland's image as a devout Catholic nation.

The 3,000-page report is due to be published by mid-afternoon following the five-year investigation by the Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation.

It is expected to reveal that 9,000 children – one in seven – died in the 18 institutions investigated between 1922 and 1998, when the last one closed, according to a leaked version of the report obtained by the Sunday Independent, an Irish newspaper.

The institutions, which doubled as orphanages and adoption agencies, were established across Ireland throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

While run by nuns, they received state funding and were also regulated by the state.

Deputy Prime Minister Leo Varadkar on Monday said the report into their history made for difficult reading.

“One of the things that hit me was the extent to which this was an enormous societal failure and an enormous societal shame that we have a stolen generation of children who did not get the upbringing they should have,” he told national broadcaster RTE.

Irish Prime Minister Micheal Martin is expected to issue a formal state apology to the victims in the country’s parliament on Wednesday.

Tuam ‘chamber of horrors’ prompts investigation

Tens of thousands of women, including rape victims, were sent to the homes to give birth.

Government records show that the mortality rate for children at the homes was often more than five times that of those born to married parents.

The commission into the institutions was formed in 2014 after evidence of an unmarked mass graveyard at an institution in Tuam, in the western county of Galway, was uncovered by amateur local historian Catherine Corless.

Corless found death certificates confirming that nearly 800 children had died at the site, but there were no burial records.

She said she had been haunted by childhood memories of skinny children from the home.

Excavations in 2017 revealed “significant quantities of human remains” in 20 underground chambers in a decommissioned sewage tank on the site’s grounds, the commission said in an interim report.

Then-Prime Minister Enda Kenny described the burial site at Tuam as a “chamber of horrors”.

The grim revelations have further tarnished the Catholic Church’s reputation in Ireland, which has been shattered in recent years by a series of tragedies that includes abuse at workhouses, forced adoptions of babies born out of wedlock and priests who have sexually assaulted children.

During the first papal visit to the country in almost four decades in 2018, Pope Francis begged for forgiveness for the scandals.

IRELAND: ‘The lowest of the low’ – Hundreds of thousands of intimate images of Irish women released online without consent

Government facing pressure to criminalise the non-consensual sharing of intimate images.

By Ellen Coyne

Independent (19.11.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3qoXMeX> - The Government is under pressure to urgently ban image-based abuse after it emerged that hundreds of thousands of intimate images of Irish women were released online without their consent.

A victims support group has said that 140,000 intimate and sexual pictures, including many of Irish women, have been leaked and shared on the internet.

It is understood that some images were leaked from private social media accounts without consent, while others appear to have been taken without the woman's knowledge. Some of the files also include images of underage girls, which is an offence.

The non-consensual sharing of intimate images is not a criminal offence in Ireland.

Those sharing the images have been "trading" pictures of women, and boasting about having access to pictures of women on a county-by-county basis. The files were first uncovered by the Victim's Alliance, a lobby group representing victims of crime.

Linda Hayden, the group's founder, said it first uncovered a server with a file containing 11,000 images that were "mostly of Irish women".

After searching through more websites and servers, the group said it is now aware of at least 140,000 stolen images of women. In some cases, there are multiple pictures of the same women or duplicates of the same image.

The Irish Independent understands that one server which was hosting the files this week has now been taken down. Ms Hayden said that the Victim's Alliance has been going through the images, and trying to identify and find the victims involved.

"We are not equipped for this," Ms Hayden said. "We believe that Irish women were targeted because the perpetrators know there is no law against sharing intimate images without consent. There seems to be a blind spot."

Sinn Féin leader Mary Lou McDonald told the Dáil that the "megafiles" of images had been uncovered by the Victim's Alliance.

"This is a profound violation of women and girls' rights and demonstrates again the inadequacy of Irish law in protecting them against such abuse," Ms McDonald said.

She said that 18 months had passed since the former justice minister got Cabinet approval to amend a Labour Party bill that would criminalise the non-consensual sharing of intimate images. Ms McDonald said the "glacial pace" of the law had to be improved by the Government.

Some of the images were taken from women's private social media accounts. In some cases, images were widely shared without consent from websites like OnlyFans.

Labour TD Duncan Smith criticised the men who thought that sharing such images was "acceptable, laddish behaviour".

"Nothing could be further from the truth, this has to be refuted by every man in Ireland. It is the action of a degenerate, it is scummy, it is the lowest of the low."

Helen McEntee, the justice minister, told the Irish Independent abuse in any form "is utterly unacceptable and has no place in Irish society".

The Women's Aid helpline is 1800 341 900.

IRELAND must prioritise female healthcare, urges women's council

Group seeks free contraception, universal pension system and support for lone parents.

By Shauna Bowers

The Irish Times (20.01.2020) - <https://bit.ly/369TcWN> - Ireland has had a "litany of historic health scandals" affecting women and female healthcare must now be prioritised, the National Women's Council of Ireland (NWC) has said.

In its "feminist Ireland manifesto", published on Tuesday, the NWC called on general election candidates to show their commitment to gender equality by signing up to 10 key issues, relating to women's health, domestic violence and accommodation.

Among the feminist lobby group's demands were calls for free universal contraception, support for lone parents, establishment of domestic homicide reviews and the introduction of a universal pension system.

Orla O'Connor, director of NWC, said the election has the potential to "set the political agenda for the next five years" and will be "crucial" in deciding the future direction of the country.

"We have seen from recent controversies such as CervicalCheck that women's health must be given consistent focus and dedicated resources," Ms O'Connor said. "We have to put a sustained focus on women's health, on the gaps that exist in services and in driving the change that women have been so active in calling for publicly."

Delivery of SláinteCare

"We're calling on candidates to commit to the delivery of SláinteCare, to develop women-centred mental health services, to introduce universal, free contraception and to ensure access to the full range of abortion services across the country."

The NWC also raised the issue of domestic violence and called for an increase in the number of domestic abuse refuge spaces available across the State.

"One in four women in Ireland experience physical and sexual violence," Ms O'Connor added. "After Ireland finally ratified the Istanbul Convention on violence against women in 2019, we need candidates who will prioritise its full implementation, including strengthening legislation and investing in frontline services, and ensuring Ireland has enough refuge places."

Ms O'Connor said Ireland has "the highest childcare costs in Europe, one of the highest rates of women's homelessness in Europe, and only one third our recommended refuge spaces for women fleeing violence", adding that it is "critical" that the incoming government tackle gender equality.

The 10 issues in NWC's feminist Ireland manifesto

- End the housing and homelessness crisis
 - Prioritise women's health
 - Deliver a public childcare service
 - Change Ireland's record on violence against women
 - Ensure safe, legal and local access to abortion
 - Eliminate poverty
 - End the gender pay gap and deliver decent work for women
 - Advance women's leadership
 - Lead a green new deal
 - Guarantee access to justice
-

ITALY: Burial of aborted fetuses causes outrage in Italy

Women take legal action over fetus graves marked with mothers' names in so-called Fields of Angels.

By Hannah Roberts

POLITICO (15.10.2020) - <https://politi.co/2HitsR9> - At the Prima Porta cemetery, hundreds of white wooden crosses mark the burial plots of aborted fetuses. On each cross is written the name of the woman who terminated the pregnancy.

Until recently, the existence of the cemetery was unknown to many of the women, who say they consented neither to a burial nor to being named. Now that they do know, more than 100 have come together to pursue legal action demanding those responsible be identified.

In Italy, where women still struggle to access abortion four decades after legislation permitting the procedure was passed, the discovery of the burial site has resulted in an outcry. It has also focused attention on dozens of similar sites across Italy — known as "Fields of Angels" and created with the involvement of anti-abortion, ultra-conservative associations.

For opponents, such burial grounds stigmatize abortion and undermine the legitimate choices of women at a time when conservative groups globally are attempting to push back reproductive rights won decades ago.

The Prima Porta site stands out because it names the women.

Its existence came to light earlier this month after Marta Loi made inquiries about what happened to her fetus. Writing on Facebook, she described the "anger and anguish" at discovering a burial plot with her name on it, and that "without my consent, others have buried my child with a cross, a Christian symbol, which does not belong to me."

Silvana Agatone, president and founder of LAIGA, the Italian association for doctors who carry out abortions, told POLITICO that the burials were "the most serious violation of privacy. Many women do not tell relatives or friends about the procedure."

"It is a way of punishing the women by creating a sense of guilt," she said. "To have a tomb with your name on implies that you are as good as dead."

Monica Cirinnà, a senator in the Italian parliament, told POLITICO: "Every woman who terminates a pregnancy has the right to choose if and how to bury the fetus and according to which ritual. These are deeply personal decisions that cannot be brought into question."

The issue is a reminder of the global pushback against women's rights, Cirinnà said. "Even today, women's bodies are battlefields. Attacks on women's freedom, regarding the choice to become or not to become mothers, are now coming from everywhere, continuously undermined by small, silent but insidious procedures like this one."

Medical objections

Although abortion has been legal in Italy since 1978, it has been fiercely opposed from the start by an alliance of religious and political conservatives. There are similar situations in many other countries, but campaigners say the extent to which the Catholic Church remains embedded in Italian institutions means it has been particularly effective in frustrating the implementation of abortion rights.

The majority of doctors qualified to carry out an abortion refuse to do so on ethical grounds — that's an average of 69 percent across the country, rising to 80 percent in the south, according to the health ministry. That means access is limited and delays common.

Junior doctors often fear their career will be damaged if they don't join the ranks of objectors, and department heads refuse to hire non-objectors, said Agatone.

The rise among Italian doctors of conscientious objectors does not constitute a problem, according to the health ministry, because the number of abortions is falling while the number of objectors remains stable.

Elisa Ercoli, president of *Differenza Donna*, an advocacy group representing 130 of the *Prima Porta* women, said the *Fields of Angels* "are emblematic of the obstacles to women exercising their right to an abortion in Italy."

"The level of objectors is so high that the health care guaranteed by law is not accessible," she said.

Most of the women, Ercoli added, had degrading experiences in hospital, with some medical staff refusing to help them even though they were in pain: "These women feel betrayed by the state. There was a total violation of their legal rights and privacy."

According to a 1990 law, women can request the aborted fetus and bury it within 24 hours. But if they don't, the local health service is responsible for arranging transport and burial. Over the past two decades, Catholic associations have increasingly stepped in, relieving the local health authority of the cost and trouble of burying aborted fetuses.

The most prominent group doing this, *Difendere la vita con Maria*, has 3,000 members and says it has carried out over 200,000 burials. It solicits donations for funding on its website, which says: "For only €20 you can bear the cost of burying an unborn child."

Spokesman Stefano di Battista said the group does not work in Rome at present. But in the cities that it does work, it collects the fetuses, usually once a month, from the hospitals with which it has agreements, before burying them after a short ceremony. The group never identifies the women, he said, adding: "Anonymity is a guiding principle for us. We do not do this practice to battle against abortion rights. We are not interested in crusades. We believe it is at the basis of civilization to bury with dignity and piety the children that never came into the world."

Church ties to the right

Catholic associations might be responsible for the Fields of Angels, but they wouldn't have been able to proceed without political sympathizers at regional and national levels.

In 2007 in Lombardy, a center-right/conservative administration introduced new regulations stipulating that all fetuses had to be buried in specific areas within cemeteries. Le Marche and Campania have approved similar laws.

Last year, an attempt to introduce similar legislation by the hard-right Brothers of Italy party in Lazio was defeated. The liberal Italian Radicals party condemned it as "psychological violence against women."

"It is in [the political right's] nature to try to bring back a patriarchal culture, before women's liberation," said Ercoli. "But it is not just about political parties, it is a larger cultural discussion. Since 1978 women have been fighting to try to win the actual implementation of the rules."

It is not clear who bears responsibility for the naming of the women at the Prima Porta cemetery. The section where the fetuses are buried contains only those aborted after the 20th week of gestation, when the procedure is permitted only on health grounds, according to Agatone.

The hospital involved, San Camillo, said responsibility for transport management and burial lies with Ama, a company that manages cemeteries on behalf of the city of Rome. Ama said in a statement that it had no contact with patients and followed the rules of the health system.

Italy's privacy watchdog has opened an investigation into the burials, and Health Minister Roberto Speranza has been called to speak about the case in parliament.

Politicians on the left are pushing for a change in the law. A group of leftist councilors in the Lazio region proposed a new regional law on transport and burial of fetuses, with clear consent required from the woman. The current law is too ambiguous, said Councilor Marta Bonafoni: "It must not leave any space for doubt or uncertainty."

But for some, the cemetery case has merely highlighted the need for more general reform. The obstacles to abortion have been tolerated because it is a woman's problem, said Ercoli. "After 40 years the struggle is not over. We must be alert and we must be united."

ITALY's 'boys' club' politics shuts women out of coronavirus debate

POLITICO asks six women from across sectors what they would do differently.

By Greta Privitera

POLITICO (18.05.2020) - <https://politi.co/3cZBDwG> - Women are overwhelmingly on the frontlines of the coronavirus pandemic. And yet, in Italy, when it comes to engineering an exit from lockdown, they've had a hard time getting heard.

Women make up two-thirds of Italy's health workers, 80 percent of cashiers in supermarkets, 90 percent of home care workers and nearly 82 percent of teachers. But very few have a seat at the table where key decisions are being made about the policies to navigate the country's reopening.

Italy is still in the hands of a “boys’ club,” Emma Bonino, one of 16 senators who filed a motion calling for the government to increase female representation in its working groups, told POLITICO. “Men pass power from hand to hand in a closed circle.”

Following a month of protests and public outcry — including the social media campaign “Dateci Voce” (Give us voice) — Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte appeared to take the criticism to heart and pushed for more women to be appointed to the expert groups advising the government.

Five new women will join the Vittorio Colao task force charged with designing Italy’s roadmap out of the crisis. The previously all-male scientific committee managing the emergency response will see six female experts join its ranks.

Is it too little, too late? As Italy comes out from under lockdown, POLITICO asked women from across sectors what they would do differently if they were involved in designing the government’s deconfinement strategy.

* * *

Orna Serio, middle school teacher, Milan

Before February 23, Orna Serio had never heard of Zoom. When Italy’s schools closed, she had to reinvent how she did her job — one she’s done for 30 years.

To her, a major blind spot of the current recovery plan is the uncertainty surrounding kids’ futures. Despite teachers’ best efforts, their education has been seriously interrupted.

Serio, who is a mother of three, knows how difficult it can be to keep up with kids’ school work. She sees the effort that her students’ families are putting in from behind the screen, but worries that it’s not a long-term solution.

Children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are at particular risk of getting lost in the system, according to Serio, and the government should be looking at how to get them the proper tools.

“It takes even more funding to provide families in need with computers and tablets to follow lessons online,” she said. “Despite initial aid, many students have been left out.”

The government also needs to more clearly understand the link between the reopening of schools for kids and the ability of their parents to get back to work, according to Serio.

Italy’s education minister has suggested schools could reopen again in September, with a mix of in-person classes and online learning. But the lack of clarity on what the new arrangement will look like has left many parents wondering how they will go back to work if their kids aren’t in school all day.

In many families, deprived by the coronavirus of being able to rely on grandparents, the burden of child care will fall to women, who are still most often the primary caregivers in Italy, exacerbating existing inequalities.

“I understand the difficulties of having to manage a historical moment like this, but it seems like we are being driven with one eye shut, with no long-term project in sight,” Serio said. “At some point you have to choose a path.”

Giovanna Iannantuoni, dean of Università Bicocca, Milan

Giovanna Iannantuoni, one of only five female university deans in Italy, knows exactly what she would have said, had she been asked to contribute to the debate.

"I would have recommended using the university laboratories to do mass swab testing and make serological kits for the population, because testing is essential," she said. "Our laboratories were never called on."

Now that tests are more widely available, Università Bicocca is the first university in Italy to test all of its employees — more than 2,000 people.

"I went out of my way to start 'Phase Two' by making those who work with me safe," said Iannantuoni. "A woman's approach? Well, I'm proud of it. It's a way of taking care of our community and [protecting] others from unnecessary risks."

Excluding women from discussions on how to move the country out of lockdown — and what life will look like on the other side — makes no sense, said Iannantuoni, who said she hopes politicians will put the well-being of citizens at the center of the debate.

"Starting at my university, I would like to build workplaces with flexible policies, capable of reconciling working life with private life," she said.

"We need to rethink the social model in which we live," she added. "It takes courage to unhinge cultural assumptions, and courage is often a woman's virtue."

Emanuela Girardi, founder of the nonprofit Pop AI, Turin

Emanuela Girardi became one of the main promoters of the "Dateci Voce" initiative when she realized the government would not notice the absence of women's perspectives unless it was confronted with its own biases.

"It all started in a chat with some girlfriends," said Girardi, an artificial intelligence expert who is also a mother of three. "After the announcement of the task force dedicated to rethinking the future of Italy, for the umpteenth time in this emergency it was clear to us that our politicians do not consider women."

A major issue that has been ignored, she said, is the fact that Italy has one of the lowest rates of female employment in Europe — 50 percent. That means that, under the government's new measures, 72 percent of the approximately 4 million people returning to work in this next phase of lockdown are men.

"They can go back to work because at home they have a wife, a partner, that takes care of the children," said Girardi.

Italy needs to be making it possible for women to work outside the home, she said. Those in power have to understand that "gender equality makes sense, it increases the GDP of the country and contributes to the development of the economy."

To advance that goal, the government should also introduce legislation to ensure gender balance in institutions and expert groups that design legislation, said Girardi, who is a member of the ministry of economic development's expert group on artificial intelligence.

Although she has "always been against 'pink quotas,'" Girardi said she now thinks they may be the only way to make tangible progress in a "male system" and make sure women are heard.

Paola Pedrini, general practitioner, Bergamo

Although Paola Pedrini represents family doctors in the region of Lombardy — the most severely affected by the outbreak — the government didn't seem particularly interested in her insight on the situation, she said.

"Nobody ever called me from the government to ask me for information, only the mayor of Milan, Beppe Sala, did once," said Pedrini, the Italian Federation of General Practitioners' sole female regional director among 19 men.

She said she would have pushed the issue of lacking personal protective equipment in hospitals, advised against clogging emergency rooms and emphasized the need for more "at home" diagnostic tools. Having a team of people equipped to carry out tests outside hospitals and advise people on self-isolating would undoubtedly have saved lives, she added.

Instead of listening to doctors, the government "listened to the entrepreneurs," who resisted turning cities like Bergamo into "red zones," she said.

If she was involved in current discussions, she would advise against moving into the next phase of lockdown at all.

"We are not able to immediately isolate a suspected case and that person's close contacts, because testing is only done at the hospital," she said. "General practitioners also still lack protective equipment, which as of now is still being procured by donations."

Pedrini also said she wished the government understood the importance of giving people clear information.

When the number of hospital cases appeared to have decreased, the government called it good news, ignoring the fact that the numbers had fallen because hospitals were full and they no longer took in patients — meaning COVID-19 sufferers were left at home, sometimes in critical condition.

"Even now, the situation that is communicated is not realistic. Those who have mild symptoms and stay at home are not calculated in the numbers, so we do not yet have a reliable figure," she cautioned. "I would have advised that letting people know how things really are was important to earn people's trust."

Stefania, cashier, Milan

Since the emergency began, Stefania, who works at the checkout of a supermarket in Milan, has hardly taken off her blue uniform.

"It's better now, but in the beginning it was hell," she said. "We were without masks or visors. People were storming supermarkets, and no one sanitized the spaces."

She wants the government to pay greater attention to essential workers like her and her husband, who also works in a supermarket. Essential workers, she said, should be given the right protective equipment and be systematically tested if they're expected to keep working while others self-isolate.

The government's failure to do so puts people like Stefania "in a risky position, both for ourselves and our families," she said.

Stefania, who asked to remain anonymous because she is afraid of losing her job, also stressed the need for more support for families like hers who are struggling to find child care solutions while they work.

The government's "babysitter bonus" — a monthly €600 check given to each family — is helpful, but not nearly enough, she said. On days when she and her husband had to work long shifts, they had to pay a neighbor to look after their 7-year-old son for 12 hours.

She also wishes she could spend more time with her son, and help him with his homework, without sacrificing the income they need. "I feel guilty, but we need the €1,000 I earn a month, otherwise we would not be able to pay the rent, the expenses, and everything else."

Her family is only getting by thanks to the help of the people around her, she said. "I, as a woman and a mother, feel abandoned by the state."

Laura Boldrini, senator, Rome

For Laura Boldrini, the epidemic has highlighted an unbearable situation: Fifty-one percent of the population is still excluded from the political debate.

In the midst of an epidemic, that means that discussions over how to handle the emergency and what comes next are inevitably skewed according to what men consider important, making these plans less effective than they could be.

Boldrini, who is one of the senators to have called for more female involvement in lockdown discussions, is tired of hearing stories of women who have been forced to give up their jobs or whose partners don't help with child care, she said.

She is worried that failing to address the specific challenges women are facing during the pandemic will exacerbate current inequalities. "We must stem the damage so it does not become an accepted construct," she said.

She wants politicians involved in the current discussions to consider this an opportunity to build "a more contemporary and just society" — one where child care can be shared equally between women and men and families are supported by generous welfare programs that free both parents up to work.

"These are structural changes that start from politics," she said. With only men at the top, though, there's a real possibility that the government's new measures set society back, she added. "We cannot miss this opportunity."

NETHERLANDS wants to punish silence on sex abuse in closed communities

By Karolin Schaps

Thomson Reuters Foundation (28.08.2020) - <https://reut.rs/3gQumR3> - The Dutch government wants to prosecute members of private groups and communities who fail to report sexual abuse in their organisations, a move that comes after Jehovah's Witnesses rejected demands to tackle the under-reporting of abuse.

A 2019 report commissioned by the government to investigate sexual abuse involving Jehovah's Witnesses found few cases were being reported to police, but group leaders dismissed calls for change and said they were being discriminated against.

They were not immediately available for comment on the latest government plans.

Minister for Legal Protection Sander Dekker said the reluctance to change had spurred him to analyse how a law that punished organisations for failing to report sexual abuse could be structured.

"This makes it clear to me that the leadership (of the Jehovah's Witnesses community) does not see or does not want to see the gravity of the situation. The leadership is leaving vulnerable victims out in the cold," he said in a letter to parliament published late on Thursday.

"Victims of sexual abuse in the Netherlands have the same right to access help, care and justice, regardless of which community they belong to," he added, promising a progress update on the potential legislation later this year.

The 2019 report, carried out by the University of Utrecht, found that about 80% of the 751 members who came forward to speak with researchers had reported abuse to leaders within the community. Three quarters said the response was inadequate.

Only 28% of them made an official report to the police, the research found. Almost half of the cases involved incest.

In order to provide more urgent support to victims, Dekker said he had allocated government funding to the Reclaimed Voices foundation, a charity supporting sexually abused children within the Jehovah's Witness community.

The government has also requested that support network Slachtofferhulp Nederland (Victim Support Netherlands) broadens its services to specifically help victims of sexual abuse from closed communities.

Iva Bicanic, director of the Dutch-based Centre for Sexual Violence, said establishing a reporting point within communities for victims to come forward was a good initiative, but was unlikely to have an immediate and far-reaching impact.

"It's too simplistic to think that abuse within closed communities will immediately be reported," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"Much more is needed from within the community itself, it needs to agree to a whole new code of conduct."

NORTHERN IRELAND: Lesbian couple grateful to be 1st to legally wed in Northern Ireland

The women were planning a civil union ceremony if marriage had not passed.

By Tracy E. Gilchrist

Advocate (07.02.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3bnvgD0> - Marriage equality became law in Northern Ireland as of January 13, and Sharni Edwards and Robyn Peoples, who've been

engaged for five years, became the first same-sex couple slated to legally marry there next week, according to the BBC.

While marriage equality has been the law of the land in England, Wales, and Scotland since 2014, but in July 2019, but the United Kingdom's Parliament stepped in following a collapse of Northern Ireland's government and OK'd an amendment to legalize marriage equality and abortion there. The law went into effect in January, which allowed same-sex couples to start registering to marry in time to begin marriages in February.

Peoples, 26, and Edwards, 27, intended to celebrate their love with a civil union ceremony if equal marriage had not passed. Now they are part of LGBTQ history there.

The women will legally wed Tuesday in Carrickfergus, County Antrim.

"We're both nervous but very excited," Peoples told the BBC. "We just can't believe it's happening next week."

The women met in 2014 when Edwards, who is from Brighton, England, was visiting a cousin in Belfast, where she met Peoples at Kremlin nightclub.

"We haven't been separated since. We just clicked," Edwards told Pink News. "You know when you know."

The women became engaged a year later on a trip to Paris to see Ariana Grande. Brandishing a lock with their names engraved on it, Peoples proposed on the "Love Lock" bridge in Paris.

The next year, Edwards created a proposal of her own, spelling out "Will you marry me?" in rose petals.

The women credit the Love Equality campaign with really pushing marriage forward. They were also active in the movement, marching at Belfast Pride and various marriage equality events.

"It is so surreal for me. I still have to pinch myself. I just feel humbled and grateful," Edwards said. "The younger generation need people to look up to, to see it's OK for a woman to love a woman."

POLAND: 100 days since Poland banned abortion, Polish women are fighting back

By Sandrine Amiel

Euronews (12.05.2021) - <https://bit.ly/2Rzz5zW> - Maja, a 27-year-old from a small town in the northeastern Polish region of Podlasie, was neither financially nor emotionally ready for another child when she found out she was pregnant.

With legal abortion in her country not being an option, she contacted a group providing underground postal access to abortion pills and took them at home while breastfeeding her 11-month-old baby.

Another woman, Anita, wanted a child but learned when she was 13 weeks pregnant that due to a congenital defect, her baby would die within a few hours of birth - if not before.

Due to a recent change in Polish law that forbids women from terminating pregnancies even in cases of severe and irreversible fetal defects, the young woman was told to wait until she miscarried.

100 days since the Constitutional Court imposed a near-total ban on abortion, Maja and Anita's stories have become the new normal in Poland.

Since January 27, the only exceptions to the total ban on abortion are in cases of rape or incest or when the mother's health is in danger. Doctors who carry out abortions face up to 3 years in prison.

As a result, many Polish women are forced to continue pregnancies against their will, while others go abroad to have abortions. Others have abortions in secret at home.

The law sparked the country's biggest protests in its post-communist era and drew international condemnation, including from the European Union.

Tens of thousands of women impacted

Abortion without Borders, an initiative founded in 2019 to support women in unintended pregnancies in Poland and abroad, says it has helped a total of 17,000 people access abortion, either at home - using pills - or abroad, in clinics, in the first six months after the Polish constitutional court ruling.

That is a significant increase compared to 2019 when 5,000 women turned to the group for help in terminating their pregnancies.

Kasia, 15, was one of those the charity helped. She was 12 weeks pregnant when she managed to tell her mother that she was expecting. She was worried about disappointing her mother but instead she contacted Abortion Without Borders on her daughter's behalf.

Kasia had an abortion in the Netherlands last month.

Women Help Women, a group providing postal access to abortion pills, says it has responded to over 46,000 messages from Poland and provided help to 10,000 people.

'Resilience and solidarity'

"It's been devastating for women because it is clearly an oppressive system that has developed against their health and their lives," said Irene Donadio, senior lead of strategy and partnership at the International Planned Parenthood Federation-European Network (IPPF-EN).

But she also noted the "amazing resistance and resilience among women in Poland with activists that have been engaged immediately in mobilising solidarity and raising funds to support women in situations of hardship."

The Abortion Abroad initiative said it raised over €91,000 of funds in the six months after the ruling.

The funds were used, among other things, to cover the costs of abortion procedures and pills, pay for accommodation and travel as well as COVID tests.

Another example of cross-border solidarity is the group Ciocia Czesia (Auntie Czech), which was set up last year to help Polish women seek abortion in the neighbouring Czech Republic.

"We felt the need to do something," Marta Machalowska from Ciocia Czesia told Euronews.

The group got in contact with similar collectives in Berlin and Vienna - Ciocia Basia and Ciocia Wienia - while launching a fundraising campaign to help cover the costs of the procedures, travel and accommodation.

Machalowska told Euronews that about 215 women contacted Ciocia Czesia thus far. The group provides them with legal and practical information in their language and puts them in touch with Polish-speaking medical staff.

In some cases, the group covers the costs of the procedure and travel completely, and in others only partially.

"Many private businesses would like to have a piece of this cake," Machalowska noted, adding that a group was "against abortion tourism."

Polish-Czech tensions

Accusations of abortion tourism were at the centre of an angry letter sent to the Czech government by a Polish diplomat in Prague, according to media reports.

The diplomat was quoted as writing: "From the point of view of Czech-Polish relations, we perceive it as unfortunate if legislative proposals to legalise commercial abortion tourism are openly justified by the intention to circumvent Polish legislation protecting unborn human life, and if those proposals have the purpose of encouraging Polish citizens to break Polish law."

The letter came as the Czech parliament debated new legislation that would clarify the terms under which foreigners can get abortions in the country.

Euronews reached out to the Polish Foreign Ministry to confirm and comment on the letter but had received no response at the time of publication.

According to Czech media, the Czech government replied that Poland did not have the ability to interfere with internal legislative processes and that abortions on Polish women on its territory was in line with both domestic and EU law.

Machalowska explained that abortion was completely legal in the Czech Republic for up to 12 weeks of pregnancy for any person legally staying in the country, including EU citizens. In case of pathological reasons, the delay is extended to 24 weeks of pregnancy.

The only change in the bill intends to ensure that Czech doctors are fully legally covered when they perform abortions, she told Euronews.

In a statement published on Facebook in reaction to the Polish letter, the group said: "The visions and pleas of Polish politicians whose imaginations have been overwhelmed by values proclaimed from church pulpits will not have any impact here."

Coronavirus challenges

Polish women seeking to terminate their pregnancies also go to neighbouring Germany, Slovakia, or further in Europe, to the Netherlands and the UK.

Yet coronavirus restrictions create additional obstacles for Polish women seeking abortion abroad.

"Covid is the biggest challenge," Machalowska said, with travel rules and restrictions "changing almost every week."

COVID testing and visa requirements also mean much higher costs for support groups working on already thin resources.

Due to social distancing rules, Ciocia Czesia activists have not been able to accompany the women to the hospital and their support was provided exclusively online, Machalowska told Euronews.

Escalating repression

Meanwhile, women's rights defenders in Poland face threats and repression.

"There is this atmosphere of terror that state agents are trying to impose on anyone who doesn't want to obey the fundamentalist agenda," Donadio told Euronews, pointing to a report released last month by IPPF-EN, Human Rights Watch and CIVICUS.

"And we see that human rights activists are deprived of their freedom to protest, their freedom of assembly. They are charged for organising protests."

As regards doctors, they are "clearly terrified with the changes because the government is putting a lot of pressure on hospitals and all on medical professionals. There is this immense threat of prosecution against doctors that is creating a massive chilling effect," Donadio went on.

And the legislation might get even tougher in the future.

According to a letter, signed by 200 civil society organisations and sent to the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU, a new bill criminalising abortion was presented by citizens' initiative."

"If adopted, the bill would afford full legal protection to the fetus from the moment of conception and limit the grounds for legal care by banning abortion in cases where pregnancy results from sexual assault or if the health of a pregnant person is at risk, as provided for in the Family Planning Act currently in force. Abortion would be treated as homicide punishable with up to 25 years of imprisonment," the letter read.

Focus on perinatal care

With abortion out of the equation, the Polish government is planning to implement a package of measures later this year to boost perinatal care.

It has said it will create more perinatal hospices as well as provide additional care for pregnant women with foetal defects within hospitals and offer a helpline with "family assistants" on hand to provide advice.

But according to human rights groups, "under the pretext of providing care to pregnant women whose fetuses have a 'suspected or diagnosed lethal defect,' [the initiative] would require them to be referred to antenatal hospices where their pregnancies would be monitored and their decisions about pregnancy influenced," the letter sent to the EU Presidency read.

'EU needs to respond'

Human rights groups say they want a bolder reaction from EU institutions to the situation in Poland.

"The European Union has been aware of the massive problems in Poland. I think that they have taken some steps in terms of infringement procedures and all that" but "it could be bolder. It could be stronger," Donadio said.

"We want the general affairs council of the European Union to seriously treat the vast abuses of fundamental rights in Poland" at its June 22 meeting, she said.

"We would also like to see a strong stance on the constitutional tribunal," she went on, because "the same tribunal that has adopted a decision that led to the almost total ban on abortion will now rule on the supremacy of EU law in Poland. So we risk that this politicised organ could give a blank check to this government to do whatever they want and that women will be sacrificed."

"What we want to see is the use of the rule of conditionality of funding," Donadio went on, with reference to a new mechanism that ties respect for the EU's core democratic values with EU funding.

"This has to be used because now they are negotiating a gigantic financial package and we know that there are risks related to that, on how these incredible amounts of funding might be used to cement that authoritarian power in Poland."

But it may take a while until the rule of law mechanism is triggered.

"We know that it will take about 3 years before the conditionality clause will be triggered if it is ever triggered," Donadio noted.

"EU Member States should consider how to address the problem that they created the clause for because we don't have three years to waste."

POLAND: Polish women mark Women's Day protesting abortion ban

By Vanessa Gera

AP News (08.03.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3lclQ2v> - Women's rights activists in Poland marked International Women's Day on Monday caught between reasons to celebrate and a heavy sense that they are facing a long battle ahead.

This year's Women's Day, which was marked with protests, comes after a near total ban on abortion took effect in January in the mostly Roman Catholic country, a step that had long been sought by the conservative ruling party, Law and Justice.

But as Polish Women's Strike leader [Marta Lempart](#) told The Associated Press ahead of a protest in Warsaw, Poland is also a country that is undergoing rapid secularization, with support growing for a liberalized abortion law.

She and other movement leaders are convinced that the process of social change ultimately will favor their struggle for reproductive freedom. Monday's protest focuses on abortion rights, but also included calls for greater state support for in vitro procedures and sexual education.

"We have reasons to celebrate because we are a mass movement, we are the only country that is becoming secular so quickly and that is becoming feminist so quickly," Lempart said.

Around her, supporters of the Women's Strike poured into its Warsaw office, preparing banners and other materials for their "Women's Day Without Compromises" protest hours later.

Compared to mass protests of the past months, Monday's protests were relatively small. The demonstrators, however, faced a large presence of police who created cordons to contain the crowd in a limited area. Police declared the gathering illegal because it defied pandemic restrictions, and officers requested identification from people and some scuffles ensued.

"We keep fighting. I don't see a way to stop it," said Klementyna Suchanow, another Women's Strike leader and the author of a book "This is War: Women, Fundamentalists, and the new Middle Ages," about global efforts by ultra-conservatives to roll back women's rights.

"We are under attack by religious radicals, and this is an international movement. so we women in different countries, we need to face it and fight against it," she said. "It's something that is happening to all of us: to Argentinians, to Americans, to Poles, to Croatians."

Activists noted that Polish women are getting abortions no matter what the law says, some with pills and others by traveling to Slovakia, Germany, Norway or other countries. "If a woman wants to have an abortion nothing will stop her," said activist Marta Krzynowek, who says the restriction on abortion rights are part of a larger assault on democracy in Poland.

"Abortion is only one part of this picture," she added. "We are all very, very tired, but we have the energy to try and change things. This situation isn't good and it is worth fighting for."

Suchanow noted that many activists have been arrested, charged with crimes, or faced police violence at protests.

"This cannot be wasted, it cannot be for nothing," she said.

POLAND: Abortion law: Protesters take to streets again as near-total ban comes into force

By Euronews with AFP, AP (28.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/39tFrqU> - New anti-government protests broke out in Polish cities on Wednesday, shortly after the country's top court

confirmed its highly divisive ruling that will further tighten the predominantly Catholic nation's strict anti-abortion law.

The ban on abortions in nearly all circumstances is to come into effect after the law was published in the Official Gazette on Wednesday.

Thousands of people gathered outside the court building in Warsaw in the evening, responding to calls for new protests by women's groups who masterminded weeks of massive demonstrations last year against the initial ruling in October.

Protesters later marched through the city centre to the ruling party's headquarters with signs of the leading "Women's Strike" group and pro-LGBT rights rainbow flags.

Protests were also held in many other cities, under a heavy police presence. More demonstrations are planned for Thursday.

Delayed law takes effect

The law, originally passed in October, was subsequently delayed due to widespread protests throughout the country against the measure, which took place amid the coronavirus pandemic and saw clashes between demonstrators and police. No violence was reported at Wednesday's protests.

Poland's ruling conservative government said on Twitter: "The Constitutional Court presented a written justification of the ruling on the protection of life. In accordance with constitutional requirements, the ruling will be published today in the Official Gazette."

The Constitutional Court, which was reformed by the religious, conservative Law and Justice Party (PiS), [has banned abortions](#) of fetuses with congenital defects. Termination of pregnancy will now be allowed only if the woman's health is threatened or if the pregnancy is the result of a criminal act, such as rape or incest.

Critics argue that it narrows the already tight law to a near total ban of abortions.

Poland already had some of the strictest abortion laws in the European Union. Even before the ruling, many Polish women sought abortions in neighbouring Germany or the Czech Republic.

An estimated 200,000 abortions are performed illegally or abroad every year, according to feminist organisations.

The main opposition Civic Platform party condemned the court's move Wednesday as "a provocation" by the ruling party Law and Justice (PiS). It is widely seen as having undue influence on the judiciary following reforms it passed affecting the way judges are appointed.

Leader Borys Budka attacked the decision on Twitter, accusing Jarosław Kaczyński, leader of PiS and deputy prime minister, of using the ban to "cover up the traces of the government's defeat in the fight against COVID" and "the failure of the vaccination programme".

Another opposition leader, Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz, tweeted urging the government to "save the economy, don't set Poland ablaze."

New law fails to deter activists

The government announcement led to immediate calls for activists to take to the streets in Warsaw and across the country.

"We urge everyone to take to the streets...Express your anger as you see fit," Marta Lempart of the Women's Strike, the main movement behind the protests, told reporters on Wednesday.

"The whole of Poland is mobilising, not just Warsaw, we are ready! When we talk about women's hell, we can now talk about government hell," added Klementyna Suchanow, also from the movement.

The new law was made in response to a motion from over 100 ruling party lawmakers, whose names have not been made public.

The unrest shows growing discontent among many Poles with the right-wing government, which has been criticised by European officials and politicians for eroding democracy.

POLAND delays abortion ban as nationwide protests continue

Anti-government rallies continue over court's ruling to restrict access to terminations.

By Shaun Walker

The Guardian (03.11.2020) - <https://bit.ly/36vbMdW> - Poland's rightwing government has delayed implementation of a controversial court ruling that would outlaw almost all abortion after it prompted the largest protests since the fall of communism.

"There is a discussion going on, and it would be good to take some time for dialogue and for finding a new position in this situation, which is difficult and stirs high emotions," Michał Dworczyk, the head of the prime minister's office, told Polish media on Tuesday.

The decision by the country's constitutional tribunal promised to further tighten Poland's abortion laws, which were already some of the strictest in Europe. The tribunal ruled that terminations should be illegal even in cases where a foetus is diagnosed with a serious and irreversible birth defect. This kind of abortion accounts for almost all of the small number of abortions performed legally in the country.

The decision has still not been published, despite a Monday deadline, and as such has not entered into force. "It's clearly a political decision," said Anna Wójcik, a researcher at the law studies institute at the Polish Academy of Sciences. "Judgments are meant to be published with no delay. It's a legal trick to withhold publishing."

The tribunal's decision, which was in response to a challenge from a group of rightwing MPs, has focused anger on the Law and Justice (PiS) party. PiS has ruled Poland since 2015 and has been accused of eroding democratic norms during its time in power, including by packing the constitutional tribunal with its supporters.

The abortion ruling has caused anger beyond the usual groups of PiS opponents, and the scale of the protests appears to have taken the government by surprise. The more

extreme wing of the party supports the constitutional ruling, but surveys show that much of the party's voter base does not support tighter abortion restrictions, so the PiS hierarchy finds itself in a difficult spot.

The prime minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, has called for talks with protesters and opposition MPs, while the PiS-aligned president, Andrzej Duda, suggested a new proposal that would allow abortion in cases of life-threatening birth defects but not for conditions such as Down's syndrome.

Duda's proposal is likely to be criticised from both sides – as too weak by the extreme right of the ruling coalition, and as not going far enough by those leading the street protests.

The protesters have ignored a ban on gatherings of more than five people, intended to slow the spread of coronavirus, and have come out in force. More than 100,000 people gathered in the streets of Warsaw on Friday evening for the largest gathering so far. They shouted pro-choice and anti-PiS slogans.

There has also been violence in which far-right groups have attacked protesters, and government figures appeared to stoke the tensions. The PiS leader and deputy prime minister, Jarosław Kaczyński, told people they should "defend churches" from the protesters after some were defaced. Senior figures in the country's powerful Catholic church have spoken out in favour of the constitutional ruling.

POLAND: Polish court outlaws almost all abortions

Protests will be difficult to organize due to the worsening coronavirus outbreak.

By Wojciech Kość

POLITICO (22.10.2020) - <https://politi.co/3dXUedS> - A top Polish court on Thursday tightened one of the EU's toughest abortion regulations by ruling that abortions undertaken because of fetal defects are unconstitutional.

The ruling means that Polish women may have abortions only in cases of rape or incest, or if the life of the woman is endangered.

The abortion issue has been a minefield for the ruling nationalist Law and Justice (PiS) party. It's under pressure from far-right and ultra-Catholic groups to crack down even harder, but that risks outraging Polish women. A legislative effort to restrict abortions in 2016 sent hundreds of thousands of women onto the streets and prompted a quick retreat on the part of the government.

By turning to the Constitutional Tribunal, the PiS avoids setting off a legislative fight, but the opposition, women's groups and many European organizations denounced the decision.

Street protests will be difficult to organize, however, thanks to Poland's worsening coronavirus outbreak. The whole country is set to be declared a "red zone" on Friday.

"Removing the basis for almost all legal abortions in Poland amounts to a ban & violates human rights. Today's ruling of the Constitutional [Tribunal] means underground/abroad abortions for those who can afford & even greater ordeal for all others. A sad day for

Women's Rights," tweeted Dunja Mijatović, the Council of Europe's commissioner for human rights.

Poland only has about 1,100 legal abortions a year, mostly carried out under the fetal abnormality clause, according to the Federation for Women and Family Planning, known as Federa, a women's rights NGO.

"I was really hoping this wouldn't happen. Women's rights to live healthy lives have just been swept aside," said Krystyna Kacpura, head of Federa.

"It doesn't mean there won't be abortions now," she added. "It means that poorer women will have abortions risking their lives and health and the better-off will pay for terminations abroad in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Germany, or the Netherlands. Abortion clinics there must be overjoyed today."

She estimated that the true number of abortions by Polish women is between 100,000 to 150,000 a year.

The tribunal ruled on a motion, filed last year by over 100 conservative lawmakers, asking the court to find that abortion on the grounds of fetal abnormality is anti-constitutional because it violates a child's right to be free of discrimination for health reasons.

"We are asking for the right to life of everyone, no matter their sex," Bartłomiej Wróblewski, a PiS MP, told the tribunal on Thursday. "We don't think that it's correct to say that this is being done against women. This is being done in part in the name of women."

Poland's conservatives rejoiced at the ruling.

Jerzy Kwaśniewski of the Catholic organization Ordo Iuris, which has campaigned intensely for the ban, called the decision "a great day."

The ruling also risks worsening already fraught relations with Brussels, as the legality of the tribunal's makeup remains disputed.

The court is supposed to rule on the constitutionality of laws passed by parliament. However, some of the justices were appointed by President Andrzej Duda in violation of the Polish constitution.

The tribunal's head, Julia Przyłębska, is a personal friend of PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński. Only two of the court's 13 judges opposed the verdict.

The status of the court has been one in a large number of points of friction between the Polish government and the European institutions.

POLAND: Istanbul Convention: Poland's plan to quit domestic violence treaty causes concern

By Shona Murray & Natalie Huet

Euronews (27.07.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3ibpCq9> - Poland's plan to withdraw from an international treaty on combating violence against women is causing serious concern across Europe.

The right-wing Polish government argues the Istanbul Convention does not respect religion and promotes controversial ideologies about gender. Human rights advocates say exiting the treaty would deal a major blow to women's rights.

The Council of Europe (COE), a human rights organisation distinct from the European Union, called Poland's intentions "alarming".

"If there are any misconceptions or misunderstandings about the convention, we are ready to clarify them in a constructive dialogue," Marija Pejčinović Burić, COE's secretary-general said in a statement.

"Leaving the Istanbul Convention would be highly regrettable and a major step backwards in the protection of women against violence in Europe."

MEPs have also slammed the Polish government's move.

Iratxe García Pérez, the Spanish leader of the Socialist group, called it "disgraceful". Belgian MEP Guy Verhofstadt labelled it "scandalous", adding that "violence is not a traditional value". Dacian Cioloş, the head of the liberal Renew Europe group called the move "pitiful" and "pathetic".

Hundreds of people marched in Warsaw on Friday to protest against the government's plan.

Using EU funds as leverage

The treaty, which was drafted by the Council of Europe, obliges nations to ensure that "culture, custom, religion, tradition or so-called 'honour' shall not be regarded as justification" for acts of violence against women.

It came into force in Poland in 2015, under the previous centrist government.

"The convention on violence against women is one of the most comprehensive laws to combat violence against women in the world," said Iverna McGowan, a human rights expert in Brussels.

"So this is really a very worrying signal that the government is sending that it does not wish to provide this protection for women's rights in Poland," she told Euronews, urging the European Union to put "serious pressure" on the country to stick to the convention.

Poland and Hungary have drawn the ire of Brussels in recent years over moves seen as undermining the independence of the judiciary, media freedom and the rights of LGBTQ people.

Poland's move comes after the EU agreed on a €1.8 trillion budget and coronavirus recovery package, after four days and four nights of tense negotiations over the conditions that member states would have to meet to receive the funds.

In their final compromise, EU leaders mentioned tying the handouts to "the respect of the rule of law" – but they have yet to detail the "regime of conditionality" envisioned.

For McGowan, Poland's move on the Istanbul Convention is a fresh reminder that the EU needs to be much more firm when countries stray away from liberal values.

"If the European Union really wants to live up to its commitment to human rights and democracy, I feel that it's very important that we do make recipients' receipt of EU funds conditional on compliance with the rule of law and human rights," she said.

"We need to get serious about human rights in Europe (...) This is a concern not just for women in Poland, it's a question for women's rights everywhere."

POLAND: Reject new curbs on abortion, sex ed

Don't manipulate pandemic to endanger women, adolescents.

HRW (14.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/34Rxury> - Poland's Parliament will consider regressive legislation this week that would restrict sexual and reproductive health and rights and put the lives and well-being of women and adolescents at risk, Human Rights Watch said today. The legislation is scheduled for reading on April 15 or 16, 2020 as the country remains under a COVID-19-related state of emergency that bans group gatherings. The bills under consideration were originally introduced in March 2018 and October 2019, and have since been stalled or not moved forward under the Parliament elected in November 2019. Both were met by street protests.

"Given its track record of undercutting the rule of law, it is fitting that the government would move to pass abusive laws when the public demonstrations that have met these laws before are prohibited," said Hillary Margolis, senior women's rights researcher at Human Rights Watch. "The Polish government's focus during the pandemic should be to protect people's health and rights, not diminish them."

The "Stop Abortion" bill would amend the criminal code, eliminating legal access to abortion in cases of severe or fatal fetal anomaly, further limiting what is already one of Europe's most restrictive abortion laws. The bill was introduced in March 2018 and supported by high-level politicians of the ruling conservative Law and Justice party. Its approval by a parliamentary committee led to mass protests, but the bill stalled as conservative parliament members requested a Constitutional Tribunal ruling on the legality of permitting abortion in cases of severe anomaly that threatens a fetus' life.

The "Stop Pedophilia" bill would amend the criminal code to criminalize "anyone who promotes or approves the undertaking by a minor of sexual intercourse or other sexual activity." People and organizations providing sexuality education or information on sexual and reproductive health and rights, including teachers, outreach workers, authors, and health care personnel, fear the bill could land them in prison for up to three years for doing their jobs. Parliament approved the bill during a first reading in October 2019, and it could expire if not considered by the newly elected parliament before mid-May, but had seen no progress until now.

Both bills are "popular initiatives," requiring 100,000 signatures for parliamentary consideration and were originally introduced in 2018 and 2019 but then stalled before the pandemic. They are drafted and backed by right-wing groups, including the conservative, anti-abortion, and anti-lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Ordo Iuris Institute for Legal Culture. Both bills were submitted for this week's session by Elzbieta Witek, parliament speaker, a member of the ruling conservative Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS).

Under Poland's current law, abortion is only legal to safeguard the life or health of women, in situations of severe or fatal fetal anomaly, or if a pregnancy results from rape or another criminal act such as incest. Even when abortion is legal, multiple barriers limit women's and girls' access in practice, including widespread invocation of the "conscience clause" that permits medical providers to refuse care based on personal or religious belief. Laws restricting or criminalizing abortion do not reduce or eliminate women's need for abortion, but rather drive them to seek abortion through means that may put their lives and health at risk. A group of UN experts previously called on Poland's parliament to reject the "Stop Abortion" bill.

Poland's government has blocked efforts to provide adolescents with comprehensive sexuality education that is consistent with international standards. Rather, its "Preparation for Family Life" curriculum spreads misinformation that can have negative long-term health impacts, perpetuates harmful stereotypes about gender roles and sexuality, and promotes an anti-rights and anti-LGBT agenda. The ruling Law and Justice party has misrepresented comprehensive sexuality education and efforts to advance gender equality as attacks on 'traditional' family values and threats to children, using such arguments to undermine women's and LGBT rights groups. In November, the European Parliament adopted a resolution criticizing the "Stop Pedophilia" bill's introduction.

Other government efforts to further restrict sexual and reproductive health and rights have been met by public protest, including mass demonstrations beginning in October 2016 that became known as #CzarnyProtest (Black Protest) and #StrajkKobiet (Women's Strike), which led to rejection of a bill that would have enacted a total abortion ban.

In recent weeks, the government also introduced criminal code amendments, ostensibly to facilitate COVID-19 response, including significantly increased criminal penalties for people living with HIV who knowingly expose others to the infection, raising potential maximum prison terms from three years to eight. Criminalization of people with HIV violates rights and undermines efforts to curb spread of the infection and ensure access to treatment and often targets vulnerable and minority groups, including LGBT people.

Since Law and Justice came to power in 2015, Poland's government has attempted to roll back women's rights, including through smear campaigns, systematic defunding, and other attacks on women's rights organizations and activists. The ruling party's crusade against so-called "gender ideology" has gained traction and been used to galvanize support for measures that target women's and LGBT rights and smear women's and LGBT rights activists.

In the past five years, the Polish government dominated by Law and Justice has actively undermined the rule of law and eroded the independence of the judiciary, and interfered with media freedom. It has refused environmental activists entry to Poland to attend United Nations climate talks. In 2016, parliament rejected a bill that would have increased protection of marginalized groups and identities by including gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, and age as potential grounds for "hate speech." Organizations working on women's rights, LGBT rights, and migration have faced harassment.

Poland's Parliament should reject the Stop Abortion and Stop Pedophilia bills and uphold sexual and reproductive health and rights in accordance with international law. This includes the right to access safe and legal abortion and to receive accurate, evidence-based information about health and sexuality.

The European Commission and other EU member states should make the best possible use of tools available, including the Article 7 procedures, to address the Polish

government's policies on sexual and reproductive health and rights. Article 7 under the Treaty of the European Union provides for preventive action and possible sanctions, including suspension of a member state's voting rights within the Council of the EU if that country violates the EU's founding values, such as the rule of law.

"Undermining access to abortion and comprehensive sexuality education doesn't protect anyone, and only raises the prospect of dire health consequences for Poland's people," Margolis said. "The chaos and anxiety surrounding COVID-19 shouldn't be used as a distraction from harmful attempts to push through dangerous legislation."

RUSSIA: Branded foreign agents, Russia's domestic violence groups fear for the future

Activists say the crackdown is intensifying even as reports of abuse doubled with the onset of the coronavirus pandemic.

By Samantha Berkhead and Uliana Pavlova

The Moscow Times (11.03.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3I1cilW> - Russia's decision to label one of its leading women's aid groups a "foreign agent" after a year when domestic violence spiked signals a widening crackdown on organizations seeking to tackle the problem, activists told The Moscow Times.

The country's Justice Ministry [added](#) Nasiliu.net — Russian for "No to Violence" — to the register formed by a 2012 law that allows any politically active individual or organization accepting funding from abroad to be labeled a foreign agent.

Meanwhile, reports of domestic violence [doubled](#) after the onset of the coronavirus pandemic as millions were confined to their homes in a country already grappling with an epidemic of abuse.

"The system has directed all its weapons against us and everything that we do," said Alyona Popova, a women's rights advocate who founded the *Ti Ne Odná* (You Are Not Alone) self-help network.

Nasiliu.net, which gets the majority of its funding from individual donors, provides psychological and legal support for women stuck in dangerous situations through an app and a Moscow help center.

Founder and director Anna Rivina linked the foreign agent designation to authorities' efforts to silence dissenting voices.

"This is absolutely a political reaction from the government ... this once again makes it clear to people that the state is in favor of domestic violence," she said.

Although women's rights NGOs like Nasiliu.net aren't explicitly political in nature, the government considers their support for a [bill to re-criminalize domestic violence](#) to be political activity.

Currently, Russia has no specific law on domestic violence, and the country passed a bill in 2017 scrapping prison sentences for first-time abusers whose beatings result in "minor harm." Women's rights activists have pushed for the passage of a law to reverse that move, saying it is the bare minimum required to change a widespread culture of impunity

for abusers. While a draft domestic violence bill was introduced in the State Duma in 2019, its progress has stalled due to the pandemic.

By forcing labeled entities to submit to rigorous quarterly financial audits, with steep fines for inaccurate reporting, activists say the foreign agents law stifles groups that offer a lifeline to victims of abuse.

At the same time, homegrown funding for domestic violence NGOs is [drying up](#), with state grants more likely to go to organizations promoting so-called “traditional” values.

The law also requires labeled NGOs to add the foreign agent designation to their websites and printed materials, which prevents domestic violence groups from posting signs in public with information on where to get help, Rivina said.

The government’s stance on domestic violence NGOs has been heavily influenced by conservative activists and religious leaders, who consider anti-domestic violence legislation to be an illegal intrusion on private family life. Women’s rights groups are also perceived as part of a transnational movement hostile to Russia’s sovereignty, analysts say.

Marina Pisklakova-Parker, head of the Anna Center women’s rights group, had the foreign agent designation slapped on her organization in 2016 after she pushed for stronger domestic violence legislation.

She said the issue of domestic violence was not so politicized when the Anna Center was founded in the 1990s, with dialogue around the problem focused on attempting to find a solution.

“It became politicized when radical groups started lobbying against the law on domestic violence. These groups basically protect the right to be abusive, and they just used the opportunity that the foreign agents legislation provides,” she said.

Alienate and discredit

Both Pisklakova-Parker and Popova said that by branding activists as an external threat, the foreign agents law’s end result is alienating and discrediting them among the public. “What happened to Anya [Rivina] is an effort to encourage people and companies not to help women’s organizations,” Popova said. “You are such an outcast from society — you are an agent. You wear this label and everyone around you starts to shy away from you.” Nasiliu.net is now facing growing pressure outside the “foreign agent” law as well.

Rivina said Nasiliu.net’s landlord has [ordered](#) the group to vacate the central Moscow office where it provides therapy and legal assistance to domestic violence victims by the end of the month.

“They basically told us that our activities didn’t suit them,” she wrote in a Facebook post earlier this month. “A new office for such a large-scale organization — that’s a lot of money.”

Despite Nasiliu.net’s new status, Rivina said the number of women seeking assistance from her group has remained steady.

“They understand that we are not engaged in political activities, we are helping them directly and they feel this help and they remain grateful to us. In this sense, we have no difficulties,” she said.

Still, she said she sees the situation for Russia's domestic abuse organizations getting worse before it gets better.

"Everything has a punitive bias and it's not yet clear when all this will somehow change. In addition, it's worth remembering that the law against domestic violence has not yet been adopted. All of this says that we are either standing still or rolling back into a not-very-happy past."

RUSSIA: For Russia, journalist's self-immolation is a wake-up call

Irina Slavina's last message was: 'For my death I ask you to blame the Russian Federation.'

By Eva Hartog

POLITICO (09.10.2020) - <https://politi.co/3IInVIK> - Before the pallbearers walked out there was a protracted silence. Then, as Irina Slavina's two children led the white coffin carrying her scorched corpse toward the hearse, the crowd of several hundred broke out into spontaneous applause.

To many of her supporters, Slavina's self-immolation was an act of stoic self-sacrifice and the ultimate rallying cry. Many compared her to Jan Palach, the Czech student who set himself on fire to protest Soviet occupation in 1969.

On October 2, Slavina made her way to the Interior Ministry, sat down on a bench between two bronze figures, a monument dedicated to Russian law enforcement "through the ages," and set herself on fire.

There is no doubt she meant to die — footage shows her pushing away a bystander who tried to save her from the flames even as she must have suffered excruciating pain.

Several hours earlier she had written a post on Facebook: "For my death I ask you to blame the Russian Federation."

Older social media posts that have surfaced since suggest Slavina had been considering the idea for at least a year.

In her home city of Nizhny Novgorod, some 400 kilometers east of Moscow, Slavina held celebrity status as the founder of the independent news website Koza.Press. A one-woman band, it was nonetheless among the most cited outlets in the region, providing relentless coverage of local misdeeds in a no-nonsense factual style.

"She was a straight shooter but very balanced, she never let her emotions affect her writing," Stanislav Dmitriyevsky, a prominent human rights activist, told POLITICO at a memorial service Tuesday. "But underneath it she suffered."

He recalled her driving him home after he was released from the umpteenth detention and saying: "I can't live like this. I keep writing about all of this injustice but nothing is changing."

Though many in her circle could recall similar moments of despair, the 47-year-old was known for her stoicism and her suicide has come as a huge shock.

Above all, it has drawn new attention to the toxic triple whammy faced by independent journalists in Russia generally, and regional journalists in particular; of financial pressure, harassment facilitated by draconic laws and a seemingly apathetic readership.

A day before Slavina's suicide she wrote that 12 law enforcement officers had raided her apartment at 6 a.m. after forcing open her door, confiscating USB sticks, phones and computers in a hunt for evidence of ties to Open Russia, an organization backed by former oligarch-turned-Putin-critic Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

The case itself and its connection to Slavina are, to put it mildly, tenuous: She had merely attended an event organized by the election monitoring organization Golos, at a property owned by a local businessman who, to add a tragicomic spin, also heads the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, a parody cult.

It is he who is under investigation for supposed links to Open Russia (a connection both sides have denied). But that hasn't stopped the authorities from implicating Slavina alongside a number of activists and opposition politicians — supposedly as witnesses.

"The pressure she was under would have been bearable if it had just been about her personally. But it was affecting everybody who in any way raised their voice," Marina Chufarina, who as a regional coordinator for Golos organized the event in question, said.

Chufarina said she was expecting a similar raid at her own home "any day now."

Slavina was no newbie to harassment. In recent years, Russia has introduced a spate of increasingly restrictive laws and last year alone the journalist was given a taste of a number of them.

In March she was convicted of breaking protest laws for leading a small group through the city to commemorate the murdered opposition politician Boris Nemtsov, a Nizhny Novgorod native.

Just before summer, she was convicted of cooperating with an "undesirable organization" (Open Russia again) for promoting a series of pro-democracy lectures on social media. And in October she was convicted of "disrespecting the authorities" after mocking a memorial plaque to Stalin online.

More recently, she was found guilty of "spreading fake news" after writing about an alleged first case of coronavirus in a different town.

Combined, the convictions resulted in fines totaling some 160,000 rubles (€1,700) — about five times the average Nizhny Novgorod salary. Moreover, every day spent in court was one she couldn't spend writing.

The use of the lawbook over the fist or bullet — or other means of silencing independent voices which were popular in Russia in the nineties and noughties — might look like evolution. But especially for regional journalists, the constant court cases and raids, or risk thereof, pose an existential threat.

"For us crowdfunding the money to replace even a couple of laptops is a big problem," Andrei Grishin, the editor of independent outlet Vesma in Russia's Far Eastern Magadan, said.

Independent outlets like his face a bind: stripped of state funds they can't accept foreign grant money lest they be labeled "foreign agents." Meanwhile, local businesses are wary

of placing ads in outlets that might be deemed anti-government. So even in good times, their futures hang by a silver thread — let alone in bad times.

“Irina made a radical choice in expressing her protest. But a huge number of editors and journalists at a local level are being pushed in that same direction by the Russian authorities. If nothing changes, I don’t know what will become of Russian journalism in the coming years,” said Grishin.

In Russia, harassment does not discriminate by size or location; journalists at large outlets in Moscow are persecuted, too. Famously, the investigative Moscow journalist Ivan Golunov was slapped with drug-dealing charges last summer and more recently the former military reporter Ivan Safronov was detained on treason charges.

But in both cases, visibility has acted as a shield, sparking public protest or at least ensuring the authorities’ actions do not go unnoticed. Sometimes, a regional case breaks through to national headlines such as that of Svetlana Prokopyeva, a journalist in Pskov, who risked landing in jail for “justifying terrorism” in a column but ending up receiving a fine.

Most of the time, however, distance from Moscow correlates negatively to visibility, even within the journalistic community. That leaves local journalists extra vulnerable to the grudges and gripes of local authorities equipped with increasingly draconian laws.

“For years we covered the news around Slavina. But we failed to see the systematic pressure being applied to one and the same person, our fellow journalist,” Alexei Venediktov, chief editor of the opposition-leaning radio station Ekho Moskvy, said in a broadcast. Venediktov is among those who have signed an open letter demanding the possible prosecution of officials who might have contributed to Slavina’s suicide.

Even the Russian authorities seem to have been cowed. Hours after Slavina’s self-immolation, investigators released a defensive statement disputing any link between their raid and her action, saying she had just been a witness. And in a highly unusual personal Instagram post, the governor of the Nizhny Novgorod region, Gleb Nikitin, pledged he would take personal charge of a probe into her death.

But many in Slavina’s circle are unimpressed, asking: If Slavina was only a witness, why was her home raided and her property confiscated? And if the governor appreciated her work, why hadn’t he stopped the authorities from harassing her before? To them, the statements just underscore the arbitrariness of the repression she was subjected to.

At the memorial service on Tuesday, Slavina’s inner circle was adamant that her suicide was not the result of mental instability — a narrative peddled by pro-Kremlin media and hinted at by Russian investigators — nor of helplessness. To them, her self-immolation was a final act designed to change minds in a way she felt her journalism could not.

“She didn’t want to die tragically, she wanted change,” Maria Popova, an environmental activist whose acquaintance with Slavina goes back a decade, said.

Unlike in Palach’s case, however, Slavina’s death has largely been met with stunned resignation. In a city with a population of more than a million and a country of more than 140 million, the turnout of several hundred at the memorial is a drop in the ocean. “Where is everybody? Why aren’t there tens of thousands of people?” asked Stanislav Dmitriyevsky, the rights activist.

Some of Slavina’s acquaintances said she had become increasingly demoralized about the general apathy in Russian society and the lack of reader donations. A day after her

mother's suicide, Slavina's daughter stood in the city center with a handwritten sign saying: "While my mother burned you stayed silent." The message will have been lost on many of those passing by.

Still, to her followers and peers, Slavina is a source of inspiration.

Speakers at the memorial service did not mince their words and hundreds marched through the city center towards the site of Slavina's death opposite the police headquarters, at one point chanting "Butchers!"

The website Koza.Press has continued to publish news, for now about Slavina herself. But there are plans to keep it running.

And in Magadan, too, work continues unabated. "You're always internally bracing for some bad turn of events, so you have to take precautionary measures," said Grishin, the editor of Vesma.

"But if they come for us, we'll know what to do."

RUSSIA: Russian activists urge probe over young girl's genital cutting

By AFP

The Moscow Times (21.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2TEWPjP> - Russian rights campaigners are urging the prosecution of relatives of a nine-year-old girl who was subjected to a genital cutting operation as well as management of the clinic which performed the procedure.

Russia does not have a specific law banning female genital mutilation (FGM) and a fully fledged probe into the case would be a first for the country.

Activists say that the practice is rife in the conservative majority-Muslim Northern Caucasus, with hundreds of girls subjected to the life-threatening procedure every year.

A nine-year old girl underwent the operation at a clinic in Magas, the capital of the Northern Caucasus region of Ingushetia, in June 2019 at her father's initiative.

The girl, who lives in neighboring Chechnya, was cut without her mother's consent when she went to Ingushetia to see her father.

The child was held down by medical personnel and her stepmother, who ignored her screams, local media reported.

The girl's mother pressed charges against Izanya Nalgiyeva, the gynecologist at the Aibolit clinic who performed the operation.

Last July, a probe was opened and the gynecologist is now on trial.

But Stichting Justice Initiative (SJI), a Russian human rights group which has taken up the case, wants the Investigative Committee to conduct a comprehensive probe into the clinic and all those involved in the girl's case.

"Not all accomplices to this crime are in the dock," Tatyana Savvina, a lawyer with SJI, told AFP on Wednesday.

She said they had requested that investigators probe the management of the clinic on suspicion of crimes including sexual abuse and intentionally causing grievous bodily harm to a minor.

She said the rights group will press for the punishment for "all accomplices" including the girl's father and stepmother.

A spokesman for the Investigative Committee in Ingushetia, Zurab Geroyev, said that the activists' request was being looked into.

"So far a decision has not been made," he told AFP.

Savvina said that the organization is planning to turn to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg if a comprehensive probe in Russia was not possible.

Each year more than 1,200 girls undergo genital cutting in the Northern Caucasus and religious authorities in the region support the practice, arguing it promotes women's chastity, according to Stichting Justice Initiative.

Ismail Berdiyev, the mufti and chairman of the North Caucasus Muslim Coordination Center, has said all women should be cut "to end depravity on Earth."

International rights groups have for years decried as barbaric the practice which can lead to myriad physical, psychological and sexual complications and, in the most tragic cases, death.

RUSSIA: Ensuring Russia's sex workers' rights essential for wider gender equality

Ensuring sex workers' rights was essential, not just for the workers themselves, but for any country's wider society, including public health.

By Ed Holt

IPS (27.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2YcVMuQ> - Despite seeing a shift in attitudes towards them in recent years, Russian sex workers say they continue to struggle with marginalisation and criminalisation which poses a danger to them and the wider public.

- Sex work is illegal in Russia and, historically, public attitudes to the women, and more recently men, involved in providing it have been predominantly negative, and often virulently hostile.
- This has led to them being marginalised and with little protection against violence and prejudice not just among the general public and clients, but also the police and wider justice system.
- However, they say they have seen a change in the last two to three years as some of their work campaigning for rights and awareness of their work, has begun to bear fruit in the last few years.

"Media have begun to talk and write much more about sex work. Much of this has been more positive to sex workers, ...and both their tone and rhetoric have become more

tolerant," Marina Avramenko of the Russian Forum of Sex Workers, which offers legal consultancy and support to sex workers, told IPS.

She added: "Sometimes media outlets conduct informal opinion polls about attitudes in society towards sex work and according to the results of these informal surveys, it is evident that more people have begun to talk about the need to allow sex work."

- Sex work, which has been illegal in Russia since the Russian Federation was formed in 1991, is punishable both under criminal law and Russian civil offences legislation.
- Organising, or forcing someone into, prostitution, is a criminal offence carrying a penalty of up to eight years in jail. But sex work itself is a civil offence punishable by fines of up to 30 Euros.

Sex workers are one of the most marginalised groups in Russia today.

This is down in part to the influence of the Orthodox Church, which has grown in popularity in the decades since the fall of communism, on society and government policy. As with many other minority groups, such as the LGBTI community, sex workers have been demonised by the clergy.

Politicians also often publicly speak of sex workers in derogative or sometimes violently hostile terms.

"A negative attitude towards sex workers has been formed in society through propaganda and the Church. Sex workers are not recognised as a 'social group' and when people call for them to be killed or raped, or spread hate against them, they are not punished.

"False myths are also spread in society that sex workers destroy families, that they infect people with various diseases, and that sex workers are associated with organised crime," said Avramenko.

Criminalisation itself also fuels this marginalisation.

International rights groups, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have repeatedly highlighted the effects of criminalisation of sex work.

They point out it often leaves sex workers with no protection from police, unable to report crimes against them during their work for fear of getting a criminal record, or having their earnings confiscated or their work reported to others.

This means that the perpetrators of the crimes against them know they can act with impunity, while police can also abuse, extort or physically and sexually assault them with equal impunity.

Indeed, this is often the case in Russia. According to the Russian Forum of Sex Workers, informal surveys have shown that in about 80 percent of police raids on brothels or independent sex workers' establishments, officers beat sex workers.

Some sex workers also recount horrific incidents they know of colleagues gang-raped by police, or held for days at police stations and beaten and starved.

"In general, police officers feel even more impunity than criminals and commit many crimes against sex workers," said Avramenko.

Because of this, sex workers seldom report crimes to police. And, even if they do, these are rarely, or poorly investigated.

Evgenia Maron of the Russian Forum of Sex Workers' Executive Committee, spoke to IPS about some of the cases which the group had been involved in, including that of sex worker from Gelendzhik who was raped. Investigators refused to initiate proceedings against her attacker on the grounds that "the applicant provides sexual services, which means that the perpetrator's actions are not socially dangerous".

He was eventually jailed for five years after Russia's Commissioner for Human Rights intervened.

In another case, a man filmed the robbery and rape of a sex worker in Ufa and forced his victim on camera to say that she was a prostitute as he was sure this would guarantee his impunity. He was eventually convicted but was sentenced to just over two years in jail and released immediately because he had already served that time in prison awaiting trial.

Sex workers also struggle to access lawyers. According to Maron, out of 250 cases where sex workers ended up in court under Administrative Code offences, only two were represented by lawyers in their hearings.

International rights and health organisations have also warned of the serious health threat posed by marginalisation of certain groups in society, including sex-workers.

Russia has one of the world's worst HIV epidemics with more than a million people infected and infection rates running higher than in sub-Saharan Africa. The epidemic has been driven largely by injection drug use but HIV is increasingly transmitted sexually and sex workers have been identified as particularly vulnerable.

A study published in 2016 by the Sex Workers' Rights Advocacy Network (SWAN) in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, showed more than a quarter of sex workers had faced physical or sexual violence by police officers and that police persecution deprived them of the opportunity to work in safe conditions, choose clients, or use condoms with every client.

But stigma and fear of their work being exposed mean sex workers struggle to access proper healthcare.

"Sex workers face obstacles in receiving medical care, primarily because there are very few special programs for them, and when they turn to state healthcare services, sex workers hide because of concerns about stigma that they are engaged in sex work," said Maron.

Maron said that ensuring sex workers' rights was essential, not just for the workers themselves, but for any country's wider society, including public health.

"In the the event of violence, a sex worker cannot control the use of condoms, for example. Sex workers having greater guarantees of protection from violence, being able to file complaints with the police without obstacles, and rapists being punished to the fullest extent of the law will lead to positive health outcomes in the long run.

"It is violence that prevents necessary protection against STIs and other infections which have an important impact on public health," she said.

In a few months a new version of Russia's Administrative Code, which governs civil law offences, is due to be approved by lawmakers.

During its drafting phase Russian rights organisations and sex worker groups campaigned to have penalties for sex work stripped from the new version of the code.

The fines are officially recorded in an Interior Ministry database and employers running background checks on job applicants will often reject those they see have fines for sex work. There have also been reported incidents of the children of sex workers being refused access to higher education or employment in the public sector after these records have been found.

"[Having] prostitution as an offence destroys all opportunities for [these] women in their future lives," Irina Maslova, director of the Silver Rose sex workers' rights movement, was quoted as saying in the Kommersant newspaper in March.

The calls were ignored and relevant articles in the current code on sex work will remain in the new code.

Many rights groups say that the work undertaken by groups like the Russian Sex Workers Forum to try and guarantee sex workers' rights is essential to ensuring wider gender equality.

In a 2017 report, the Global Network of Sex Work Projects argued that "ultimately, there can be no gender equality if sex workers' human rights are not fully recognised and protected".

The group said: "Sex workers' rights activists, feminist allies and human rights advocates have long held that the agency of sex workers must be recognised and protected, that all aspects of sex work should be decriminalised, and that sex work should be recognised as work and regulated under existing labour frameworks.

"Given that the majority of sex workers are women and many come from LGBT communities, protecting sex workers' rights is imperative to achieving gender equality as defined under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)".

According to a policy brief on sexual health and rights by Women Deliver, an international organisation advocating around the world for gender equality and the health and rights of girls and women, "policies that address the often tenuous legal positions of sex workers should ensure that they are not further victimised by laws that could potentially lead to incarceration".

"Sex workers are often forced to live and work on the margins of society due to the criminalisation and stigmatisation of their work; this provides them with little possibility for legal recourse if they experience any kind of gender-based violence. Strong legal and policy frameworks must include provisions that reflect the complete and diverse experiences and challenges women face in order to truly provide comprehensive protection of women's sexual health and rights," Women Deliver state.

Meanwhile, Russians sex workers continue to call for decriminalisation, although, Avramenko argues, it will only help to a certain extent.

"By itself, decriminalisation will not change much," said Avramenko, citing the experience of sex workers in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan where sex work is decriminalised.

"There, sex work is not punishable, but the police and the state are constantly finding ways to violate sex workers' rights," she said.

She added decriminalisation needed to be accompanied by greater public awareness of sex work and its benefits for society as well as rooting out police corruption.

It appears unlikely this will happen any time soon with the church continuing to wield significant influence over political policy and public opinion, and the recent lack of change to civil law offences for sex work.

Maron said that for activists like her there was little they could do than carry on their work.

"We will continue to try to improve access to healthcare and justice for sex workers and open dialogue about what sex work is and what interaction with a sex worker means for wider society," she said.

Their work does seem to be having some effect though, as the change in media reporting and surveys showing a more positive public attitude to sex work suggest.

"This is down to our work," said Avramenko.

SCOTLAND becomes first country to provide period products for free

Tampons, sanitary towels and other period products will have to be available free of cost in Scotland.

By Pierre-Paul Bermingham

POLITICO (25.11.2020) - <https://politi.co/2JqD0us> - Scotland became the first country in the world to make feminine hygiene products available for free as the Scottish Parliament unanimously passed the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act on Tuesday evening.

The [law](#) requires local authorities to ensure period products such as tampons or sanitary towels are available free of cost in their area. Schools, universities, and other education institutions must also have free period products in their restrooms, as must a number of public buildings.

Scottish Labour MSP Monica Lennon introduced the bill in April 2019 and led the legislative effort. "Periods should never be a barrier to education or push anyone into poverty," said Lennon, also the spokesperson for health and sport of her party. "Women, girls and all people who menstruate deserve period dignity," she added.

A study in May by [Plan International UK](#) found that 30 percent of girls aged 14-21 struggled to access sanitary products during the lockdown in the United Kingdom.

Lennon thanked grassroots activists who played an important role in campaigning for the measure, as well as precursors such as the North Ayrshire council, which had implemented a policy of free sanitary products in 2018.

Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said she was “proud to vote for this groundbreaking legislation.”

Though Scotland is the first nation to make feminine hygiene freely available to all, a handful of countries have banned the “tampon tax” – the levying of VAT on sanitary products.

In Europe, Ireland is the only country with no tampon tax. The EU only allows zero-rate VAT derogations on products which were zero-rated before EU legislation.

SPAIN: Spanish govt endorses clearer, tougher law on sexual consent

Spain’s government has approved sexual consent legislation that aims to crack down on sexual violence and harassment by codifying offenses and adopting new punishments

ABC News (06.07.2021) - <https://abcn.ws/2TcjgQA> - Spain’s government on Tuesday approved sexual consent legislation that aims to crack down on sexual violence and harassment by codifying offenses and adopting new punishments.

The bill endorsed at a Cabinet meeting says: “Consent is recognized only when a person has freely demonstrated it through actions which, in the context of the circumstances of the case, clearly express the person’s will.”

The legislation, popularly known as the “Only yes means yes” law, now goes to parliament for a debate and vote, probably in September.

Government spokesperson María Jesús Montero said the proposed law is “a decisive step forward” in the protection of women, which “makes us, without doubt, better as a society.”

“We have to transform our sexual culture, placing women’s consent at the center of how we see things,” Montero said during a news conference.

The changes contained in the bill follow outcries in recent years over court decisions in sex crime cases.

In 2018, five men were sentenced to nine years in prison each for the lesser crime of sexual abuse in a case that activists saw as a gang rape during the 2016 running of the bulls festival in Pamplona. “It’s not abuse, it’s rape!” protesters shouted at the time.

Spain's Supreme Court increased the men’s sentences to 15 years after prosecutors appealed.

Spanish law punishes non-consensual sex but it is not clearly codified and relies on evidence of violence or intimidation to decide whether it a criminal act occurred and if so, the degree of punishment.

The government hopes the bill will remove the need for victims to prove they resisted or were subjected to violence. Any non-consensual sex will be regarded as aggression under the proposal. It sets out punishments that include prison terms of up to 15 years.

The bill also addresses for the first time sexual harassment in the street, identifying it as a minor offense that can be prosecuted on the evidence of the offended person. Convictions would be punishable by voluntary work and fines.

The legislation also would establish nationwide crisis centers for women that are open 24 hours a day year-round.

Women's rights have been a political banner for Spain's Socialist-led coalition government, which has a mostly female Cabinet.

SPAIN will now fine companies that don't reveal gender pay gap data

Ministers say closing the gap is crucial to COVID-19 economic recovery.

By Erica Sanchez & Leah Rodriguez

Global Citizen (14.10.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3jnE3I5> - Spain is starting to take steps to hold companies accountable for contributing to the gender pay gap.

The Spanish government enacted measures on Tuesday requiring that companies release employee salary information or pay a fine, according to the Associated Press (AP).

The regulation, approved earlier this year, will fine companies €187,000 (\$220,000) if they do not share how they decide base salaries and other benefits with employees.

Under the new law, companies that employ more than 50 people also have to file their four-year strategy for balancing the number of male and female employees at their workplace.

"The message is very clear: women must be paid the same as men for doing the same jobs," Equality Minister Irene Montero said at a news conference after a weekly cabinet meeting, according to Reuters.

Montero went on to warn that the government needs to take action and help prevent the gender pay gap from worsening due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Ending the pay gap will be crucial to economic recovery, she added.

Women were one of the groups hit hardest by unemployment during the pandemic, according to government data.

The regulations aim to "bring to the surface labor inequalities and give workers the tools to eliminate them," Labor Minister Yolanda Díaz said, according to the AP.

Díaz also called the gender pay gap a "democratic aberration," at a press conference, according to the AP.

Although Spain is one of the top 10 countries for gender equality, women in the country still earn 22% less than their male colleagues, the Spanish government reports. What's more, nearly 27% of people living in poverty are women — 2% more than the number of men living in poverty.

The overrepresentation of women in low-paying industries, the imbalanced care burden placed on women, discrimination, and lack of female representation in executive positions all contribute to the pay gap across the European Union.

Spain's new gender pay gap laws are part of the country's left-wing coalition government's efforts to protect women's rights since coming into power in January, according to Reuters. The government also cracked down on sexual violence laws in March, deeming all non-consensual sex as rape.

"You can't play around with fundamental rights," Díaz said.

SPAIN toughens law against sexual violence

All non-consensual sex will be regarded as rape, with tougher sentences available to judges.

By Graham Keeley

Al Jazeera (03.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/39xBhf0> - Spain is set to toughen legislation against sexual violence in the wake of a notorious alleged gang rape at the world-famous bull-running festival in Pamplona.

The left-wing coalition government, comprised of the Socialists (PSOE) and the far-left Unidas Podemos (UP), on Tuesday, approved a draft bill to change the penal code to classify all non-consensual sex as rape.

Under Spain's current legislation, the perpetrator must have used intimidation or violence against the victim for the offence to be classed as rape.

Under the new Sexual Freedom Law, sentences for rape will be increased from between four and 10 years to up to 15 years if there are aggravating factors.

Judges will be able to pass tougher sentences if violence or drugs are used to incapacitate the victim, or if she is the wife or a former partner of the rapist.

Under the terms of the legislation, special courts will hear cases involving sexual violence cases. This is already the case with domestic violence cases.

After the bill's cabinet approval on Tuesday, it must be examined by two state commissions before being voted on by Parliament. It is not expected to become law for at least six months.

'Wolf-pack'

The ambitious law was the brainchild of Irene Montero, the minister for equality who is a leading member of UP, and its introduction comes just days before Spain marks International Women's Day on March 8.

Calls to reform the criminal law concerning sexual offences have been mounting after a series of high-profile trials, including the so-called "Wolf Pack" case, in which an 18-year-old woman was gang-raped during the Pamplona bull-running festival in 2016.

In 2018, the conviction of five men on the lesser charge of sexual abuse - not rape - sparked protests across Spain and demands to change the law.

The men, known as the "Wolf Pack" after the name of the WhatsApp group in which they shared a video and images of the attack, had their sentences increased from nine to 15 years in June last year after prosecutors appealed to the Supreme Court.

In a separate case in November, five men were cleared of raping a 14-year-old girl, but jailed for the lesser charge of sexual abuse in a case which reignited protests against Spain's controversial sex offence laws.

Those men, aged 18 to 21, were jailed for between 10 and 12 years, but avoided conviction for the more serious charge of sexual assault or rape because the court ruled that the men did not use violence against the child.

The men had taken turns to have sex with the girl after a party in Manresa, about 45 miles north from Barcelona in October 2016.

After this case, a survey for La Vanguardia newspaper found 97 percent of respondents wanted tougher laws regarding sexual offences, while 3 percent were content with the current legislation.

Maria Alvarez, of the commission for International Women's Day in Spain, said the law change was a first step towards combating sexual violence.

"This is an important move to change the criminal law, but more must be done in education to teach boys and girls to respect each other," she told Al Jazeera.

"Courts have also handed down some shameful sentences which have reflected whether women were drinking or what they were wearing. That must stop."

However, the law change has prompted criticism from the conservative right in Spain.

Cayetana Alvarez de Toledo, spokesman for the conservative Popular Party in the Spanish parliament, said: "In reality, are we going to convert sexual relations into a process of interrogation? A 'no' is a no, obviously. But is a silence also a 'no' or a 'yes'?"

Jorge Buxade, an MEP for the right-wing Vox party, told Al Jazeera: "This law discriminates unfairly in favour of women and against men. We want to defend women and men equally from sexual violence."

SWEDEN: Rape conviction rates rise 75% in Sweden after change in the law

By Emma Batha

Thomson Reuters Foundation (22.06.2020) - <https://reut.rs/3keOe3a> - Rape conviction rates in Sweden have risen 75% in two years following a major change in the law, spurring calls on Monday for other countries to revamp their legislation.

Sweden changed the legal definition of rape in 2018 to sex without consent. Unlike in many countries, prosecutors do not have to prove the use or threat of violence or coercion.

The National Council on Crime Prevention (Bra) said the rise in convictions - up from 190 in 2017 to 333 in 2019 - showed the change had had a greater impact than expected.

"We were surprised there was such an increase," Bra senior researcher Stina Holmberg said on Monday.

"It's a good sign. This has led to greater justice for victims of rape," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation, adding that she hoped the law would encourage discussions on the issue of consent in schools and homes.

Women's rights campaigners called on other nations to follow Sweden's example.

"This shows an urgent need for other countries to follow suit," said Katarina Bergehed, senior policy adviser on women's rights at Amnesty International in Sweden.

"Sexual activity must be consensual. Anything else is rape."

Britain, Belgium, Canada, Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland and Luxembourg already define rape as sex without consent, while Denmark, Finland, Spain and Portugal have promised similar reforms.

'Shockingly low'

Bergehed said most people still thought of rape as an attack by a stranger, but a review of court cases in Sweden showed almost all victims knew their assailant.

"These stereotypes are not helping victims to step forward - it makes them unsure of whether they really experienced rape or not," she added.

Bergehed said many women also blamed themselves for what happened, particularly if they had frozen and not fought back.

Police and courts often query a victim's story if she did not retaliate, but there is growing evidence that many victims experience temporary paralysis when raped.

Bergehed said a study by a Swedish emergency clinic for rape victims showed 70% had experienced a "frozen fright" reaction.

While Bergehed welcomed the rise in convictions, she said the overall number remained "shockingly low".

Reports of rapes rose to 5,930 in 2019 from 4,895 in 2017, but Bergehed said this was the tip of the iceberg. She said sexual crimes were not prioritised and investigations often flawed, meaning few cases went to trial.

Police said last year they would recruit new staff to focus on sexual crimes and domestic violence.

Sweden's 2018 rape law also introduced a new offence of negligent rape for cases where courts found consent had not been established, but that the perpetrator had not intended to commit rape.

The Bra review showed 12 people had been convicted of this offence.

Holmberg said senior judges needed to provide clearer guidance to courts on the offence.

UK: 'Honour-based' offences soared by 81% in last five years

Lawyer calls for improved education on issue and says figures are likely to show 'tip of the iceberg'

By Haroon Siddique

The Guardian (31.10.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3nQnpF5> - The number of "honour-based" abuse (HBA) offences recorded by English police forces has soared over the past five years, figures suggest.

According to data from the 28 out of 39 constabularies that responded to freedom of information (FoI) requests, the number of HBA cases – including offences such as rape, death threats and assault – rose from 884 in 2016 to 1,599 last year, a rise of 81%.

While some of the increase in HBA offences could be down to more victims coming forward and improved identification of offences by police, Imran Khodabocus, a senior associate at the Family Law Company who represents families in such cases, said the rise was alarming.

He said: "It's essential education around what honour-based abuse is and how it impacts families is improved across the country. These figures are likely to just show the tip of the iceberg: lockdowns have exacerbated the problem for many and as we continue to get back to normal life, I expect to see even more cases involving honour-based abuse. "Of course, due to the very nature of these cases, it's likely many victims will never even think to approach the police and the issues are often not recognised by schools, social services or the police."

[Forced marriage](#) and [female genital mutilation \(FGM\)](#) are other instances of HBA offences committed, according to the Crown Prosecution Service, "to protect or defend the honour of an individual, family and/or community for alleged or perceived breaches of the family and/or community's code of behaviour."

There are estimated to be [12 to 15 so-called "honour" killings](#) in Britain every year. Notorious cases include Banaz Mahmood, whose [father, uncle and other relatives](#) plotted to murder her after she left an allegedly abusive marriage and fell in love with another man; and Samia Shahid, from Bradford, who was [killed on a trip to Pakistan](#). Shahid's ex-husband and father were [arrested in Pakistan](#) in connection with her death but her father died while on bail and nobody has stood trial.

The Home Office has collected data from police forces on HBA offences on a mandatory basis since April 2019. Its first figures, described as "experimental", [showed 2,024 offences recorded in 2019-20](#), although it said as it was often a "hidden" crime, this was likely to have been a "small proportion" of offences actually committed.

Greater Manchester police (GMP) were excluded from the Home Office figures because they could not supply data owing to installation of a new IT system, and were unable to respond to the FoI request either.

Karma Nirvana, a charity that supports victims of honour-based violence, said the omission of figures from GMP, England's third biggest force, was significant as the area generates a lot of calls to its helpline.

Natasha Rattu, the director of Karma Nirvana, acknowledged police identification of such crimes was better, albeit still with room for improvement, but said: "The fact that there are increases suggests that people are and have been feeling more desperate or more at risk."

The charity wants a fresh review of policing of honour-based abuse by HM Inspectorate of Constabulary as it says many of the recommendations of the last report, in 2015, which found police were [not doing enough to protect victims](#), have not been implemented.

A National [Police](#) Chiefs' Council spokesperson said: "We acknowledge that these abuses are hugely under-reported and we remain focused on giving victims the confidence and come forward. I urge anyone with information or concerns about honour-based violence to contact the police – your report will be taken seriously."

UK: Four-fifths of young women in the UK have been sexually harassed, survey finds

Exclusive: YouGov poll reveals extent of abuse and lack of faith in authorities' ability to deal with it

By Alexandra Topping

The Guardian (10.03.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3shlz0W> - A UN Women UK survey found 80% of women of all ages said they had experienced sexual harassment in public spaces.

More than four-fifths of young women in the UK have been subjected to sexual harassment, according to a survey for UN [Women](#) UK, which warns that most women have lost faith that the abuse will be dealt with.

Among women aged 18-24, 86% said they had been sexually harassed in public spaces, while just 3% did not recall ever having experienced sexually harassing behaviour. The remaining 11% chose not to answer the question.

According to the survey, published in a [report by the all-party parliamentary group \(APPG\) for UN Women](#), 71% of women of any age said they had experienced sexual harassment in public spaces.

"This is a human rights crisis. It's just not enough for us to keep saying 'this is too difficult a problem for us to solve' – it needs addressing now," said Claire Barnett, executive director of UN Women UK.

"We are looking at a situation where younger women are constantly modifying their behaviour in an attempt to avoid being objectified or attacked, and older women are reporting serious concerns about personal safety if they ever leave the house in the dark – even during the daytime in winter."

The survey of more than 1,000 women, carried out by YouGov and seen exclusively by the Guardian, exposes a damning lack of faith in the UK authorities' desire and ability to deal with sexual harassment – 96% of respondents did not report incidents, with 45% saying it would not change anything. Among those who said the event was not serious enough to report were women who had been groped, followed and coerced into sexual activity, said UN Women UK.

As part of the [UN Women UK's Safe Spaces Now](#) project, the organisation collected stories from 400 women and sent an [open letter to leaders](#), calling for better designed public spaces, improved reporting systems and education.

"We've seen really strong results elsewhere in the world. Our problem now is that sometimes in the UK, we think we are a leading light in terms of progress, and we forget to work on the gender-based violence that still happens every day at home, especially to women and marginalised groups," said Barnett.

Laura Bates, founder of the Everyday Sexism Project, said women were recognising the abuse they faced as sexual harassment, but it was unsurprising they had no faith in an "utterly broken" system.

"If you talk about wolf-whistling or street harassment in the UK, you are liable to find yourself on the front page of a tabloid being called a 'feminazi' and accused of overreacting, so of course young women don't think that they'll be taken seriously if they come forward," she said.

Bates pointed to [TUC/Everyday Sexism research](#) that found 52% of women had experienced [sexual harassment at work](#), and of the one in five who had reported it, three-quarters said nothing had changed, while 16% said they were treated worse as a result.

"At the root of all this is the normalisation of the idea that a woman's body in a public place is simply public property and young women just have to put up with it. We have to shatter that normalisation through policy and in the press if we want to change the picture," she said.

Note: This article was amended on 24 March 2021. Due to incorrect information supplied to us, an earlier version said the UN Women UK survey found that 97% of women aged 18-24 had reported being sexually harassed in public spaces, and 80% of all women; these figures are actually 86% and 71% respectively. The headline has also been amended to reflect this updated text.

UNITED KINGDOM: All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief: Report on Gender and FORB

Section Gender and FORB of the Commentary on the Current State of International Freedom of Religion or Belief (2020)

<https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/media/2020-APPG-commentary-final.pdf>

APPG (01.03.2021) - Stakeholders of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief have reported concerns at the intersection between freedom of religion or belief and gender in several countries.

This section offers a precis of some of the key issues of concern and several salient examples.

The COVID-19 global pandemic has had catastrophic consequences for vulnerable populations around the globe. At the intersection of gender and FoRB is a compounding of vulnerabilities which in 'normal' times is systematically exploited by antagonists of

FoRB.²⁹ This produces a global pattern of abuse including 'forced marriage' and 'sexual assault' as the two most common tactics used against Christian women in 50 countries.³⁰

COVID-19 restrictions have further exacerbated these complex vulnerabilities whilst simultaneously increasing impunity for aggressors. Governments, civil society actors and fragile national infrastructures struggle to deliver a COVID-19 response resulting in greater impunity for perpetrators of gender-specific religious persecution.

Gender-based violence targeting minorities merely blends in with the increased domestic violence or honour killings. Many of these abuses and violations are hidden and under-reported or, at worst, known and yet dismissed in pandemic times. A senior leader in **India** has stated they have lost significant ground in protecting religious minority women against gender-based violence (GBV) as there has been a significant increase in targeted trafficking of vulnerable communities facing economic hardship and lack of food security due to lockdowns.

A report published last year by The Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID) stated, "The evidence gathered suggests that across contexts and religions, there is a pattern of girls and women being targeted for sexual grooming, not only out of sexual predation, but a wider political project to hurt the religious minority and create a religiously homogenous society."³¹

Country content:

In **India**, Dalit women experience double marginalisation due to their gender and caste. In October 2020, the BBC reported on a Dalit woman who was gang-raped in Uttar Pradesh.³² The situation in India is a microcosm representative of other regions. FoRB violations here have been exacerbated during COVID-19. Furthermore, evidence suggests that government restrictions and violence are gender specific.

In **Nepal**, some women and girls convert to Christianity. However, it is dangerous for them to reveal their faith, so they quietly or secretly take part in church services. When known, they are discriminated against by their peers, socially ostracized and severely beaten by family members. Immediate family of 'convert' Christians may lock them up. After isolation, they are often deprived of basic survival needs, educational support, parental possessions and basic legal rights. Physical violence comes gradually after emotional and mental torture.³³

In some rural areas, Christians are socially boycotted and are not allowed to use community resources. In one instance, the Buddhists living in a post-earthquake IDP camp did not allow Christians to share water from the same supply system, and two separate supplies had to be installed. As it is women who use community resources more often than men, this denial of resources affects them more.³⁴

In **Malaysia**, legal rights of women and girls are undermined by provisions that make exceptions for *sharia*.

Civil society organizations stated in a Feb 2018 CEDAW report "Muslim women now enjoy far less rights in marriage, divorce, guardianship of their children and inheritance than their non-Muslim counterparts." It also stated: "Other areas of gross discrimination against women under the Islamic Family Laws include divorce, polygamy and child marriage."³⁵

These laws open avenues of vulnerability for female converts from Islam to Christianity, the most prevalent being the threat of rape and/or forced marriage to a Muslim. The minimum legal age for marriage in the Islamic family laws (16 for female) can be lowered with the consent of a *sharia* judge. This law increases the vulnerability of girls who convert to Christianity. The federal government tried to act against child marriages but encountered the bitter resistance of conservative Muslim federal states. In some cases, young Christian women are abducted, never to be heard of again. This is an effective tactic because once they are 'registered' as Muslims there is no mechanism for reversing this, even in the event of divorce. Additionally, all children born because of the so-called "marriage" are also legally considered Muslim. A small number of converts are thought to have fled or gone into hiding to avoid this kind of religiously motivated family retribution.

In **Iraq**, some 2,800 Yazidi women are still missing and both Yazidis and Christians are subject to regular violence and often blamed for the spread of COVID-19.

Concerns were raised by minority faith groups in August 2019 that proposals to include four Islamic clerics among the Federal Supreme Court's 13 members could mean that *sharia* would always take precedence.

Opponents claimed it would end attempts to overturn legislation such as that which prevents Christian men from marrying Muslim women without converting to Islam.

Iraqi women are guaranteed equal rights in the Iraqi Provisional Constitution, ensuring their right to vote, run for political office, own property, and for girls to attend schools.³⁶

However, there are still existing provisions that discriminate against women in the Iraqi Constitution, the Personal Status Law, and the Penal Code. There has not been significant progress in this since the launch of the Iraqi National Action Plan (INAP) for Women, Peace and Security (WPS) to implement the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (1325) on Women, Peace and Security in 2014. While this was a promise of enabling women's participation and protection in the processes of conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Iraq³⁷ there has been little progress in a country experiencing continued economic instability, popular protests, and security problems. While the constitution requires 25 per cent of MPs to be women, they remain side-lined from making a positive contribution to peace and security initiatives and reconciliation efforts.

The reality for Iraqi women is that the impact of war and sectarian conflict has left many as widows, who can quickly fall victim to poverty.

The impact of freedom of religion and belief violations has further disempowered women from religious minorities. The Daesh conflict, early marriage, exclusion from school, domestic violence, and lack of knowledge of their social and legal rights means that their interests are unrepresented, particularly in the Nineveh Plains area of northern Iraq, which lacks a security framework and federal government commitment to lasting change. Representation continues to be made for a concerted effort to empower Iraqi religious and ethnic minorities, particularly women, through local civic representatives.³⁸ For Iraqi women from religious minorities, it is also virtually impossible for them to secure jobs in the public sector or even in the private sector outside their own communities as they do not have full citizenship rights. The combination of a lack of legal rights, opportunities for employment, violence from within their own communities and the threat of violence from militia groups, and now the COVID-19 pandemic, means that some minorities may leave Iraq permanently,³⁹ pushing Iraq into further economic destabilisation and its religious minorities into extinction.⁴⁰

Women are particularly vulnerable within these destabilising circumstances.

A report by Open Doors USA makes the point that there are gendered differences in how men and women in religious minority communities face pressures at the intersection of gender and religious identity.⁴¹ It observes that men in religious minorities face greater risk of physical violence, economic harassment and incarceration, women face greater risk of sexual violence, forced marriage and forced divorce.⁴²

In **Pakistan**, the Hazara Shia community had to face the consequences of the provincial government's mishandling of the COVID-19 crisis, as the community was blamed⁴³ for the spread of the virus. Hazara women in particular bore the brunt. Most of the Hazara women who were forced to quarantine had to spend 44⁴⁴ days in the quarantine camp in Quetta, Balochistan. The quarantine camps had sub-standard facilities⁴⁵ such as a lack of washrooms and water. Hazara women even had to face difficulties due to the racial profiling⁴⁶ of the community in the post-quarantine scenario. According to one report, some local doctors in Quetta refused⁴⁷ to treat Hazara women fearing that they will spread the virus. Similarly, women from Hindu Christian faiths in Pakistan continued to face persecution such as forced conversions and forced marriages during 2020 (details in the Pakistan country section).

In **Colombia**, women deciding to become an active Christian can face domestic abuse and sexual abuse. A former guerrilla combatant was sexually abused by her comrades when she left the group after she converted to Christianity. Another young woman grew up as a Christian, but abandoned her faith when she met her future husband. She later returned to her faith, whereupon her husband, a judge, began to abuse her, and threatening to end the marriage and to take the children away. For a time she practiced her faith secretly, but when her husband tried to force her to sign a document saying she would never take her children to church, she refused. She lost custody of the children and was forced to give him compensation.⁴⁸

Footnotes

28: <https://www.genderandreligiousfreedom.org/>

29 For further details on intersectionality of gender and FoRB see: https://www.iirf.eu/site/assets/files/116862/vol9_2016.pdf

30 <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/GSPR-2020.pdf>

31 <https://www.ids.ac.uk/download.php?file=wp-content/uploads/2020/08/CREID-Briefing-Note-Ideologically-Motivated-Sexual-Grooming-MT-August-2020.pdf#ReligiousMinorities>

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UK: Female trafficking survivors in UK forced into unsafe housing, report finds

Large proportion of victims not placed in specialist safe housing, leaving them vulnerable to further exploitation, says charity.

By Nicola Kelly

The Guardian (02.12.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2W6cdH7> - Female trafficking survivors in the UK who have the legal right to be placed in safe housing are being forced to live in "inappropriate and insecure" accommodation where they risk being re-trafficked and exploited, according to a new report.

Anti-trafficking charity Hibiscus Initiatives says that 98% of modern slavery victims referred to it in the past two years were not given specialist safe housing as is their right under UK law, but were instead housed in unsafe asylum accommodation.

Angelia*, an asylum seeker from Jamaica, was recognised as a potential victim of trafficking through the national referral mechanism, the system used to identify and provide support for trafficking survivors, in May 2019. This should have triggered her right to safe accommodation where she could receive specialist support. Instead she was placed in a multi-occupancy house with no locks, CCTV or front-desk security.

"I've shared with six, seven women in a year, from all different types of nation," she said. "I even had a baby born in the room with me. You wonder who is running this business? Do they really care about you? Do they know the people they put me with? They don't do the checks, none of them."

Angelia, who was sexually exploited in both Jamaica and in the UK, is now sharing a room with a woman who has acute mental health needs.

"She meets men in the park ... she tries to bring them back here," she said. "It's up to me to say, 'Don't bring them here, I'll call the police.' One day, a man was trying to come in the house and wouldn't go away. I stood on my bed at the window and I beat the glass, but he was knocking, knocking, he just keeps knocking, knocking ... I feel like I have to be vigilant, to take care of myself in here."

Justė Marcinkevičiūtė, Angelia's case worker, says it is very common for unknown men to show up at asylum accommodation.

"The key problem of being housed in asylum accommodation is it's not a safe house," she said. "In a safe house, whoever is arriving and leaving is being monitored and there's an extra level of support, but asylum housing is very, very overcrowded. When you have people who have been exploited and they are claiming asylum because their exploiters are looking for them, then that is risky. Subjecting survivors of trafficking to such unnecessary stress ... it's just not right."

She says many women she supports don't know what a safe house is, and it is not typically explained to them by the authorities.

"So many women have never heard of a safe house – and the fact they're not being offered that accommodation is really troubling," she said. "There are two ways forward: either asylum accommodation is made more secure, or more safe houses are established for survivors of trafficking. The way things are at the moment, it's just not working."

A response to a freedom of information request submitted by Hibiscus Initiatives to the Home Office revealed that, of 581 safe house bed spaces available to accommodate referrals, only 25% of those who are recognised victims were allocated those spaces.

The chief executive of Hibiscus Initiatives, Marchu Girma, said: "Safe house provision is important for the recovery and wellbeing of women who are survivors of trafficking. Too many people go missing after being recognised as potential victims of trafficking by the national referral Mechanism. There needs to be more investigation into why these people disengage from the process and do not take up the support they are entitled to. The government needs to address failings and gaps by increasing investment."

The Home Office says that where a potential victim is eligible or already in asylum housing or local authority housing, and there is no risk to them in remaining in their current location, they will usually continue to stay in that accommodation unless it is assessed that they require a place in a safe house.

"The safety and security of potential victims of modern slavery remains a key priority for the government," a spokesperson said. "We are proud to provide world-leading support for victims to help them rebuild their lives. Financial support, a specialist support worker and, where needed, accommodation, is provided to potential and confirmed victims of modern slavery who have received a positive reasonable grounds decision and have consented to support from the Victim Care Contract."

** Name has been changed.*

UK: Special report: As men's sport clamours to restart, how women's sport is being abandoned

The latest on when rugby, netball, football and cricket will return in the UK.

By Fiona Tomas, Katie Whyatt & Molly McElwee

The Telegraph (29.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2XxR6yA> - Across the sporting landscape, men's sport is gearing up to resume, headlined by the return of the Premier League on June 17. Meanwhile, women's competitions are being abandoned by governing bodies and sponsors alike. In this special report, our correspondents assess the damage being caused, and ask whether it is too late to turn the tide.

Rugby: Women's game could be used for law trial

by Fiona Tomas

2020 has been a barren year for domestic women's rugby. With the Six Nations widely criticized – from cold showers for the Wales team, to no prize money or title sponsor for the women's competition – the game was struggling even before the pandemic hit.

When coronavirus took hold, all Premier 15s activity - namely group training - was suspended. On March 20, the Rugby Football Union later voided all rugby in England with the exception of the men's Gallagher Premiership. There was no mention of any efforts being explored to restart the Premier 15s in its press release.

Some club players such as Kate Alder, the Wasps Ladies captain, have not played rugby since late January - before the league paused for the Women's Six Nations. Five months later, and Alder does not know when she will be able to return to a team training environment.

"As the lockdown eases, we might be able to do small, skill-based sessions, as and when we're allowed to, with three or four people two metres [apart]," she says. "But because the whole point of our sport is contact-based, we haven't got a clue."

Reducing the amount of scrummaging during a game and limiting numbers in a maul were among 10 optional law trials approved by World Rugby this week to help reduce the risk of coronavirus transmission in sport.

Given its growing profile and meagre crowd numbers, elite women's rugby is often lumped with the community game - where the trials are expected to be applied - and therefore the Premier 15s could be exposed to such changes on a greater level than top-flight men's rugby.

But with the RFU now searching for a new title sponsor - after crisp company Tyrrells decided against renewing its contract later this year - introducing such measures could devalue elite women's rugby as a product.

"In terms of making all these changes to allow us to play, you wonder at what cost," says Alder. "If you say, 'Right we're changing this because we want players to come back and play,' is it necessarily the best way forward? To change the nature of the game, I don't think it's going to be very beneficial or realistic."

That Premier 15s squads are being trimmed from 60 to 40 from next season is timely given the concentrated efforts to lower the transmission of the virus. For now, clubs are

awaiting updates from the RFU on when group training can be resumed. "Like all organisations, we will be guided by government and medical advice and update on plans in due course," an RFU spokesperson said.

Netball: Coronavirus has halted surging momentum

by Fiona Tomas

If there is one sport set to lose the most momentum from having practically its entire season cancelled, it is netball. This time last year, the country was preparing to host a sell-out World Cup in Liverpool. In 2018, England claimed a historic Commonwealth title on Australia's Gold Coast which sent grassroots participation levels soaring.

Record crowds attended the opening weekend of the Superleague, England's domestic top-flight in February. After becoming the last competition to be wiped from the women's sport scene on Wednesday, there is a genuine fear such progress could be reversed.

Plans are being drawn up to stage a shortened version of the competition in autumn - providing there is no second wave of the virus. But nearly three months on since a ball was last thrown on March 14, netball is now staring at a blank canvas. Franchises are missing out on an entire season's worth of revenue streams. For a sport hardly awash with money, the season cancellation could decide the futures of some.

"This pandemic has highlighted more than ever how women's sport is underfunded," says Sam Bird, the head coach at Superleague franchise London Pulse. "We do not have the luxury of being able to provide tests for players, or control over our own premises to provide a safe working environment."

Return to sport guidance laid out by the government has also inadvertently exacerbated the divisions between elite amateurism and professionalism. It defines an elite athlete as 'an individual who derives a living from competing in a sport' and this criteria was a key factor in deciding the fate of the semi-professional Superleague, where full-time athletes pit themselves against self employed players and even students.

The emphasis on elitism means England internationals are likely to be the first to resume some form of team training this summer - but franchises such as London Pulse already have plans in motion. Staging small-sided netball in outdoor spaces and training at the Copper Box Arena are some of the scenarios the club is exploring.

"That might be a better short term solution, in terms of providing a safe, sanitised space for us," says Bird. "But somebody's got to open the place, turn the lights on, there are health and safety certificates. Everything that seems like a simple idea at the time, but you start drilling down into the detail and it becomes more of a challenge."

International football: Germany, US surge ahead

by Katie Whyatt

While women's football in England stalls, elsewhere other countries have charged ahead in recommencing the game. The Frauen Bundesliga will become the first major women's league in the world to restart after a postponement due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The German Football Association had first suspended play on March 13th, but, with the aid of a solidarity fund for testing funded by some of the country's richest men's clubs and a strict hygiene and testing protocol, it will resume with two games on Friday.

America's NWSL will host the NWSL Challenge Cup in the Salt Lake City area beginning on June 27: a month-long tournament featuring all nine teams will mark the return of professional team sports – men or women's - in the United States.

The league's rulings have been subject to state and local health mandates - some states have had to adhere to stringent 'stay at home' orders - but where allowed, players returned for individual workouts at team facilities on May 6 and to small group training of up to eight players this week. If five days of small group training is completed, full-team training can begin May 30.

The NWSL's player association was consulted heavily and has guaranteed accommodation for players with children during the tournament, including plans for both the parent and children's health and safety. All nine teams will be housed at two area hotels, with 300 players and 500 administrative staff members on hand.

The tournament was planned with the unanimous support of the league owners and the players' association, but there have been reports that several members of the USWNT will skip the tournament, not least because a month-long tournament featuring artificial pitches poses injury risks.

In Germany, too, there have been concerns about a risk of injury - many players will play eight games in five weeks after just a full week of training. Meanwhile the demand for teams to quarantine for seven days prior to the first game has meant that when third in the league Hoffenheim play second placed Bayern Munich, the Hoffenheim women's coach - who is also a teacher - will miss the first game.

A survey of elite women's football leagues across the world paints a more mixed picture. Across Europe, the top leagues have been cancelled, including France's Division 1 Feminine and Spain's Primera División de la Liga de Fútbol Femenino.

The French side Amiens reacted with fury when they were relegated by points per game, having only completed 75 per cent of their season, although the Spanish top league cancelled relegation. Italy's Women's Serie A is set to resume.

Domestic football: Triumphant WSL season has ended with a whimper
by Katie Whyatt

Elite women's football has not been played in England for more than 90 days. That could be extended to six months if the game cannot return before September – pending a decision on whether this season's Women's Champions League and the FA Cup can be concluded. Neither were mentioned in Monday's announcement to cancel the Women's Super League and Championship.

The last Women's Super League fixtures took place on February 23rd. The League Cup final followed on February 29th, and then England played their final game - in America for the SheBelieves Cup - on March 11th, while a smattering of Women's National League matches took place at the beginning of that month.

What had started as a landmark, triumphant, season for the game – with record domestic crowds in the modern era and a major sponsorship deal with Barclays – is now threatening to end with a whimper.

The new WSL season is provisionally scheduled to begin in September, but the Football Association knows that this is subject to change. Telegraph Sport understands that the governing body began reviewing earlier this week the scope of and potential for delays to a provisional September start.

They plan to consult with clubs, then the FA board, next week to finalise a start date for the 2020/21 season, but it will depend on the Women's Champions League. Uefa are understood to be considering an August and September tournament to finish this year's competition. An announcement around the Women's FA Cup will be included in that.

The original return date - September 27th - was set before the postponement of the Olympics, but other scenarios were repeatedly mooted during discussions around the WSL's return.

Although the majority of WSL clubs have endorsed the FA's decision to cancel the league, the feeling remains that the governing body and the Premier League could have done more to ensure the return of women's football. It is understood that the cost of coronavirus testing was beyond the budgets of most clubs - with Championship Lewes estimating the cost of finishing the remaining games to be just £3 million for all clubs.

It is dispiriting that the FA, nor the Premier League's richer clubs, were not able to organise a testing fund when no resources have been spared ensuring Project Restart goes without a hitch.

Ultimately, the sport's return date depends on how successfully the UK can ease itself out of lockdown and the impact of any subsequent waves of coronavirus. That the only women's team to have been disbanded due to the virus - AFC Fylde - has since about-turned and committed to the following season demonstrates the impact of reputational risk but does not by any means show that women's football is out of the woods. The worst could still be yet to come when it comes to clubs' finances.

Cricket: Teams are playing a waiting game

by Molly McElwee

"The one thing you can say about us is we're good at waiting," Stephen Fry's familiar voice narrates, in the England and Wales Cricket Board's emotive lockdown video titled "Together Through This Test".

But as England's men's team returned to the nets this month and ECB women's cricket director Clare Connor conceded that the men's international game had to take priority with £280million on the line, the women seem to have a longer waiting game ahead of them.

"Anyone in the women's game is pretty much very used to waiting," Yorkshire cricketer Katie Levick says. "Unfortunately that's just the way it is."

On Friday the ECB confirmed that England's women's team will return to training on June 22, and are working with the India and South Africa cricket governing bodies to try to salvage the planned series for this summer. Best case scenario the South Africa series (of four ODIs and two T20s) which England were set to host starting September 1, could still go ahead as scheduled.

However, that is the only definitive date in the women's calendar at present, and if it does go ahead it will still be exactly a year on from the Kia Super League's conclusion in 2019, the last time women's cricket was played in England.

Domestic cricket has been pushed back for men and women until at least August 1, but the women's side is arguably in more dire straits. The Hundred's cancellation saw

invaluable visibility on terrestrial television dissipate for another year and rare domestic earnings fall to the wayside.

The ECB's £20m planned investment in the women's game for the next two years cannot be ring-fenced in the current circumstances either. Forty full-time domestic contracts planned to launch this season have now instead morphed into 24 retainers at lower income for players until the more permanent system can be put in place, unlikely before October.

New regions in domestic women's cricket, teams made up from groupings of counties, were confirmed this month, but there remains little indication as to what the 50-over tournament they will compete in will look like, if it will go ahead in September as has been suggested or how player selection will work.

Telegraph Sport understands the ECB have encouraged players to direct questions to their new regional centres, but Levick says players are confused about the entire situation: "The domestic side of things has been thoroughly forgotten. The [ECB correspondence to players] has very much been "we haven't forgotten about the domestic season but it's very much TBC".

"We didn't even have that [confirmed] pre-pandemic. I had girls texting me saying what on earth is the regional thing? With or without pandemic we had no information I'd say. What are we playing? Who's playing? How are squads getting picked? We just have no idea. All I've heard is rumour of an undercover tournament in September. I still think there's so many questions around it all."

Hockey: Major events cancelled, and no headline sponsor

by Molly McElwee

Four years on from Olympic gold and glory at Rio, British women's hockey was looking to boost the sport again on the biggest stage at Tokyo. But with the Games delayed for another 12 months, a longer wait for visibility of that scale is bad news for a sport that lacks publicity at the best of times, and at the moment seems to be struggling.

Last month long-time partner, international bank Investec, declined to renew its deal with England and Great Britain Hockey, meaning that after August the national teams and the domestic league will have no title sponsor. England Hockey told Telegraph Sport it was confident of finding new sponsorship and that, from a financial point of view, it was not a big a blow in the short-term, but the message it sends is worrying.

It is not all bad news though. On some level, the fact the domestic leagues had already ended, apart from the play-offs, when lockdown measures began in March, puts hockey in a better position than other sports.

Domestic pre-season training usually begins in August, with the season set to start in September and both Great Britain and Surbiton players Emily Defroand and Hannah Martin told Telegraph Sport they were confident this would go ahead as scheduled.

Also, the fact women and men compete on the same international stages and their non-professional domestic leagues run in tandem means that there is widely parity in the lockdown circumstances.

However, major moments for visibility in the game have been sidelined. In international hockey competition the Pro League, Great Britain's women's team had not yet played at

home this year and were looking forward to May and June home fixtures, including double headers at the Stoop with an aim to boost the sport's profile.

Martin says there are hopes these could be rescheduled for the autumn, and though there not yet finalised plans in place she and Defroand say England Hockey have been good at keeping in touch with players during this limbo period.

Definitive time frames seem to be lacking from England Hockey though, who have yet to outline how the elite contact sport will return in a socially-distanced new world order, and players have not yet heard on what kind of new protocols will be in place when they do train.

One-on-one coaching is now permitted, but last week England Hockey said that the national teams would not yet be returning to the Bisham Abbey training centre. Martin says she expects centrally contracted players may be back at training in the next month, "potentially in small groups".

UK: A closer look at the UK's only FGM conviction

By Elisa Van Ruiten, Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (22.05.2019) - In February 2019, the mother of a young girl became the first person in the United Kingdom to be convicted of [female genital mutilation \(FGM\)](#) for cutting her three-year-old daughter in 2017.¹ Her Ghanaian partner, who was also charged with the crime, was exonerated.² Both had been living in the UK for several years.

The mother is originally from Uganda, where FGM is illegal and the estimated prevalence is around 1.4%. The practice has been concentrated in certain regions and ethnic groups.³ It is not known why the mother performed FGM on her daughter but authorities mentioned the possibility of a link to witchcraft.

The facts and prosecution

On 28 August 2017, the mother, who was living in East London, called the emergency services for an ambulance approximately 12 hours after the injury occurred, the girl having lost a large amount of blood. She claimed that the child had accidentally sustained an injury to her genitals after a fall on a kitchen cupboard. However, as the ambulance could not come quickly, the girl was taken to hospital in a taxi. At hospital,

¹ <https://www.cps.gov.uk/london-north/news/mother-first-be-convicted-female-genital-mutilation> and <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/01/world/europe/female-genital-mutilation-conviction-britain.html?module=inline>; To protect the identity of the child, there are reporting restrictions: no name is made public.

² <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/mar/08/mother-of-three-year-old-is-first-in-uk-to-be-convicted-of-fgm>, Note: The father pled guilty to charges of being in possession of child pornography and bestiality images.

³ https://www.28toomany.org/static/media/uploads/Country%20Images/PDF/uganda_report_15jul13.pdf

See details about the ethnic groups and the regions in the executive summary, pp 9-12.

the mother told the medical staff again the same story. She maintained the same version with the police, the medical staff, the social services, and in court.⁴

This version of the facts was rejected by the jury as it was not supported by medical examiners and the prosecution brought forward evidence of 'witchcraft'.⁵

Both mother and father of the girl in this case were charged with two counts of FGM:

- **Count 1:** Female Genital Mutilation, contrary to section 1(1) of the Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003. Both defendants on 28 August 2017 excised, or otherwise mutilated, the whole or any part of the labia minora or clitoris of the complainant
- **Count 2:** Failing to protect a girl from the risk of genital mutilation, contrary to Section 3a of the Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003. Both defendants on 28 August 2017 had parental responsibility for the complainant, a girl under the age of 16 against whom an offence of female genital mutilation was committed.⁶

The father was acquitted of the FGM charges, but the mother, in addition to the two counts of FGM, was also convicted on other charges of possessing indecent images of children and extreme pornography. In March, she was sentenced to eleven years in prison for the FGM charges and two more years for the other charges.⁷

The UK criminalised FGM in 1985 under the Prohibition of Female Circumcision Act 1985, which was superseded by the Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003.⁸

What led to conviction?

Although a few other alleged FGM cases had previously been brought forth, none ended in conviction. For example, in 2015, a gynaecologist was indicted on FGM charges for having stitched a woman's genitals after she gave birth. However, he was later acquitted.⁹

In the present case, there were several factors that contributed to the conviction; There was the evidence that the girl had in fact been cut; the medical examination at hospital

⁴ <https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/r-v-n-female-genital-mutilation-sentencing-remarks-whipple-j.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/mar/08/mother-of-three-year-old-is-first-in-uk-to-be-convicted-of-fgm> and <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/01/world/europe/female-genital-mutilation-conviction-britain.html?module=inline>

⁶ <https://www.cps.gov.uk/london-north/news/mother-first-be-convicted-female-genital-mutilation>

⁷ <https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/r-v-n-female-genital-mutilation-sentencing-remarks-whipple-j.pdf>

⁸ The Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003 came into effect "on 3 March 2004 and was amended by sections 70 to 75 Serious Crime Act 2015. Sections 70 to 72 which came into force on 3 May 2015, and which:

- extended the scope of extra-territorial offences
- granted victims of FGM lifelong anonymity; and
- introduced a new offence of failing to protect a girl from risk of FGM.

Sections 73 came into force on 17 July 2015; section 74 came into force on 31 October 2015. These provisions introduced FGM Protection Orders and a mandatory duty for front line professionals to report FGM. Section 74 provides for issue of statutory guidance on FGM, this provision has not yet come into force." The crime carries a maximum prison sentence of 14 years. https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/female-genital-mutilation-prosecution-guidance#_blank

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/feb/04/doctor-not-guilty-fgm-dhanuson-dharmasena>

concluded she had suffered a Type II cut¹⁰ and there was the testimony from the victim herself who claimed she was cut by a "witch-lady".¹¹ In addition, the brother was also a witness, and bizarre evidence was found at the home relating to the incident that prosecutors deemed to have been something akin to 'witchcraft'.¹²

In deciding upon the sentence length for the charge of FGM, Ms Justice Whipple took into account both aggravating and mitigating factors of the crime. Adding to the gravity of the act was that it had occurred at home, a place the defendant's daughter should have felt safe and protected. Furthermore, the defendant's son was present and witnessed the ordeal. On the other hand, the defendant was the primary caregiver of both children, who were now placed in foster care. In addition, the fact that the girl was not under a FGM protection order¹³ and the defendant did eventually take her daughter to the hospital were both seen as slightly mitigating circumstances.¹⁴

FGM protection orders in the UK

Under the [Serious Crime Act of 2015](#), an FGM Protection Order may be issued by a court to protect someone who is at risk of FGM or has already been subjected to FGM. Such protection orders may include travel prohibitions, the surrender of passports, in addition to other restrictions and requirements. It is a criminal offense to breach a protective order and if breached "is punishable on summary conviction with up to 12 months' imprisonment or a fine; or on conviction on indictment, with up to 5 years' imprisonment or a fine."¹⁵

348 protective orders had been made in the UK as of December 2018.¹⁶

More on FGM protection orders [here](#).

[Click here](#) for further information and resources about FGM in the UK.

¹⁰ TYPE II FGM by the World Health Organisation. See: <https://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/fgm/overview/en/>

¹¹ "...the victim later told specially – trained officers she had been cut by a "witch"."
<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/mar/08/mother-of-three-year-old-is-first-in-uk-to-be-convicted-of-fgm>

¹² [Ibid.](#)

¹³ [Ibid.](#)

¹⁴ <https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/r-v-n-female-genital-mutilation-sentencing-remarks-whipple-j.pdf>

¹⁵ https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/female-genital-mutilation-prosecution-guidance#_blank

¹⁶ See page 11:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/789792/FC_SQ_October_to_December_2018_-_final.pdf

UK: London mum gets 11 years in jail after first-ever FGM conviction

The jury heard she had sought help from a prophet to cleanse her daughter.

By Emma Batha

Global Citizen (08.03.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2WdEWrd> - The first person in Britain to be convicted of female genital mutilation was sentenced to 11 years on Friday for cutting her three-year-old daughter.

"Let's be clear: FGM is a form of child abuse," Justice Philippa Whipple told the Ugandan mother-of-two. "It is a barbaric practice and a serious crime."

The conviction last month came more than 30 years after the practice was outlawed.

Police and anti-FGM campaigners have said it will send a strong message that FGM will be prosecuted.

The maximum sentence for FGM is 14 years.

The judge told the woman, who cannot be named for legal reasons, there were "particularly sickening features" of the case, including that the cutting was done at the girl's home, where she should have felt safe.

"As (her) mother you betrayed her trust in you as her protector," the judge said, adding that the psychological impact could become a "significant and life-long burden".

Commenting on the sentence, Britain's interior minister Sajid Javid tweeted: "A welcome reminder, on #InternationalWomansDay, that we will never tolerate this barbaric medieval practice."

London's Central Criminal Court heard how police launched an investigation after the girl's parents rushed her to hospital on Aug. 28, 2017, following severe bleeding and doctors found three cuts to her genitalia.

The mother, 37, said her daughter had hurt herself falling from a kitchen worktop at their east London flat.

But the girl told police she had been held down and cut by a "witch".

Four doctors, including leading FGM experts, testified that the cuts had been made with a sharp implement and could not be explained by a fall.

Witchcraft

The jury heard how the mother turned to witchcraft to try to silence investigators and the director of public prosecutions.

Police found cows' tongues with nails embedded in them in her freezer and limes containing slips of paper bearing the names of people involved in the case and messages such as "I freeze your mouth".

The former care worker said she did not come from an ethnic group that practised FGM, and no motive was given in court.

However, the jury heard she had sought help from a "prophet" to "cleanse" her daughter, via an online contact in Nigeria.

The woman was also sentenced to two years to run consecutively after she admitted distributing pornographic videos, one involving children.

The girl's Ghanaian father was acquitted of FGM, but sentenced to 11 months for possession of pornography.

Police and prosecutors have faced mounting pressure to secure a conviction for FGM, which was outlawed in 1985. Two previous trials ended in acquittals.

The Crown Prosecution Service's Lynette Woodrow said outside court the sentence underlined that FGM was "an extremely serious form of child abuse".

She expressed hope the conviction would encourage others who have had FGM, or have suspicions about FGM offences, to come forward.

An estimated 137,000 women and girls in England and Wales have undergone FGM, which affects diaspora communities from many countries including Somalia, Sierra Leone, Eritrea and Sudan.

The internationally condemned practice typically involves the partial or total removal of the external genitalia.

Campaigners say the ritual - often justified for cultural or religious reasons - is underpinned by the desire to control female sexuality.

World leaders have pledged to end FGM, which affects at least 200 million girls and women, according to U.N. data.

UK: FGM 'increasingly performed on UK babies'

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is increasingly being performed on babies and infants in the UK, the Victoria Derbyshire programme has been told.

By Anna Collinson and Jessica Furst

BBC (04.02.2019) - <https://bbc.in/2RGpRfm> - FGM expert and barrister Dr Charlotte Proudman said it was "almost impossible to detect" as the girls were not in school or old enough to report it.

In one report, in Yorkshire, a victim was just one month old.

The National FGM Centre said it was "not surprised" that victims may be younger now.

Charity Barnardo's and the Local Government Association - which together run the centre - said its community engagement was "key to protecting girls".

Their comments follow the first UK conviction for FGM.

The mother of a three-year-old girl was found guilty at the Old Bailey on Friday of mutilating her daughter. Her partner was acquitted.

FGM includes the partial or total removal of the female external genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons.

Laws 'circumnavigated'

Dr Proudman said there was "a lot of anecdotal data which shows FGM is now being performed on babies.

"These girls are not at school, they are not at nursery, and so it's very difficult for any public authority to become aware," she added.

"By performing it at such a young age, they're evading the law."

In response to a Freedom of Information request, West Yorkshire Police said a quarter of its FGM reports (17) between 2015 and 2017 involved victims aged three or under.

The National FGM Centre said there was "anecdotal evidence from some communities that FGM laws can be circumnavigated by performing the procedure on girls at a much younger age".

"The girls are unable to report, the cut heals quicker and prosecution is much harder once evidence comes to light and the girl is older.

"There needs to be much greater recognition of this issue across different areas of the UK."

'Worried about being branded racist'

Experts say authorities need a more joined-up approach when dealing with FGM.

It is claimed children's services can be unsure when to intervene. Doctors are not always reporting it to the police - and even if they do, officers do not always know what to do.

"People are concerned about cultural sensitivities, worried about being branded racist, and it's being performed on a very private area," Dr Proudman said, explaining why it has taken many years for the first UK conviction to arrive.

Figures seen by the Victoria Derbyshire programme show that 939 calls were made to emergency services to report FGM between 2014 and 2018.

But the Crown Prosecution Service has only received 36 referrals for FGM from the police since 2010.

One 2015 report by City, University of London estimated 137,000 women and girls in England have been victims of FGM.

Lawyer Linda Weil-Curiel, whose work has led to more than 100 FGM convictions in France, told the Victoria Derbyshire programme the UK should follow the country's tougher stance.

In France, all children undergo regular genital checks until the age of six and doctors are expected to report any cases of physical abuse.

"In [the UK] system you need the victim to come and complain, but how can you expect a child to complain against her parents?," she asked.

"It's for society to protect children, to take the initiative as soon as mutilation is documented - and the only way that happens is to have a medical examination.

"There might be people horrified at the thought of their child undergoing a check. I don't understand that - we are talking about the health of children and babies," she added.

But the National FGM Centre said the key way to prevent instances of the abuse was to change "the views of affected communities" and to form "a huge cultural shift in groups where FGM is commonly practised".

It said it was helping to train professionals to be "aware of how to broach the topic, spot the signs and respond appropriately when there is a concern".

Home Secretary Sajid Javid said: "We will not tolerate FGM and not rest until perpetrators of this horrific crime are brought to justice.

He said the UK's first conviction for FGM came after "the government introduced tougher rules to criminalise this medieval practice."

Hibo's story

Hibo Wadere was six when she was forced to undergo FGM.

Some may find her words distressing.

Ms Wadere said she was told a special party was being thrown for her.

She described how that morning she was "held down, your legs yanked apart and your genitals being ripped apart.

"You saw the blood, you saw the cutter with blood on her hands," she added.

"She just kept on cutting as if it was normal for her to hear the screams.

"It was the cruellest thing for a child to experience.

"It stays with you for life. It's a life sentence."

UK: Mother of three-year-old is first person convicted of FGM in UK

Ugandan woman from east London was accused of mutilating daughter in 2017

By Hannah Summers and Rebecca Ratcliffe

The Guardian (01.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2SmcJQT> - The mother of a three-year-old girl has become the first person to be found guilty of female genital mutilation (FGM) in the UK in a landmark case welcomed by campaigners.

The Ugandan woman, 37, and her Ghanaian partner, 43, both from Walthamstow, east London, were accused of cutting their daughter over the 2017 summer bank holiday.

While the parents were on bail, police searched the mother's home and found evidence of witchcraft, including spells aimed at silencing professionals involved in the case. Police found spells written inside 40 frozen limes and two ox tongues with screws embedded in them with the apparent aim of keeping police, social workers and lawyers quiet.

The defendants, who cannot be identified for legal reasons, denied FGM and an alternative charge of failing to protect a girl from risk of genital mutilation. The mother cried in the dock as she was found guilty of FGM after the Old Bailey jury deliberated for less than a day. Her partner was cleared of all charges.

FGM was made illegal in the UK more than three decades ago but prosecutors have struggled to secure a conviction.

Lynette Woodrow, of the Crown Prosecution Service, said: "We can only imagine how much pain this vulnerable young girl suffered and how terrified she was. A three-year-old has no power to resist or fight back.

"Her mother then coached her to lie to the police so she wouldn't get caught but this ultimately failed. We will not hesitate to prosecute those who commit this sickening offence."

The National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) lead for FGM, Commander Ivan Balhatchet, said: "We have always been clear that prosecutions alone will not stop this abuse, however this guilty verdict sends a strong message that police will make every effort possible to pursue those committing this heinous crime."

Campaigners said they hoped the conviction would encourage other victims to report the crime.

Aneeta Prem, the founder of Freedom Charity, said: "It will give victims the confidence to come forward ... It will give police forces, social services, teachers, frontline midwives the expectation that something can finally succeed."

There have been three other trials involving FGM – two in London and one in Bristol – all of which ended in acquittals. The crime carries a maximum prison sentence of 14 years.

The judge, Philippa Whipple, warned of a "lengthy" jail term as she remanded the woman in custody to be sentenced on 8 March. She told her: "You have been found guilty of a serious offence against your daughter."

The two defendants were jointly accused of subjecting the girl to FGM by "deliberate cutting with a sharp instrument" at her mother's home in the presence of her father. Medics raised the alarm when the girl was taken to Whipps Cross hospital in north London with severe bleeding and a surgeon concluded the child had been cut with a scalpel.

The defendants claimed their daughter had been reaching for a biscuit when she fell and cut herself on the edge of a kitchen cupboard. Medical experts confirmed the cause of her injuries were consistent with cutting rather than a fall.

The victim later told specially trained officers during a series of video interviews played to the court that she had been cut by a "witch".

Leethen Bartholomew, the head of the National FGM Centre, said he hoped grassroots campaign groups would be given more support to train professionals.

"We know that FGM happens here in the UK and we didn't need a conviction to prove that," he said. "There is still a lack of services for survivors of FGM," he said, adding that the victim in the case must be given continual support.

Charlotte Proudman, a leading barrister who specialises in FGM, told the Guardian: "The conviction is hugely significant, securing justice for the girl but also in sending a strong message that this crime will not be tolerated."

She questioned if health workers were fulfilling their mandatory reporting duties, and highlighted a legal loophole that meant professionals only had to report cases in which children had already undergone FGM, rather than those also deemed to be at risk.

Leyla Hussein, a social activist and survivor of FGM, said she had mixed emotions about the conviction.

"We are sending out a strong message that children now come first," she said. "However, the sad thing is we could have helped that mother. That could have easily been me because 17 years ago I did not understand that FGM was wrong."

Hussein, who was born in Somalia and later emigrated to the UK, said it was not until she was 21 and her own daughter was two months old that a practice nurse raised the issue of her FGM.

"It's positive this girl got justice but as an FGM survivor I can't help thinking the system failed her. Her mother has committed a crime and we need to be honest about that. But she could have been informed about FGM through her GP or midwife."

She explained: "My daughter was at risk, I was that mother. But a brilliant health professional did her job so I made sure my daughter wasn't cut. So I'm blaming teachers, health professionals and the whole system which has failed this child who will live with FGM for the rest of her life."

There are an estimated 137,000 women and girls living with FGM in England and Wales according to City University. The Home Office has identified women from countries including Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia and Nigeria as most at risk.

There have been 298 FGM protection orders issued since they were first introduced in 2015 to safeguard those at risk.

UK: Mother guilty of genital mutilation of daughter

A woman who mutilated her three-year-old daughter has become the first person in the UK to be found guilty of female genital mutilation (FGM).

BBC (01.02.2019) - <https://bbc.in/2GdZMSK> - The 37-year-old mother from east London wept in the dock as she was convicted after a trial at the Old Bailey.

Spells and curses intended to deter police and social workers from investigating were found at the Ugandan woman's home, the trial heard.

Her 43-year-old partner was acquitted by the jury.

Prosecutors said the mother "coached" her daughter "to lie to the police so she wouldn't get caught".

The defendants, who cannot be identified for legal reasons, denied FGM and an alternative charge of failing to protect a girl from risk of genital mutilation.

Mrs Justice Whipple warned of a "lengthy" jail term as she remanded the woman into custody to be sentenced on 8 March.

FGM - intentionally altering or injuring the female external genitalia for non-medical reasons - carries a sentence of up to 14 years in jail.

During the trial, the woman claimed her daughter, then aged three, "fell on metal and it's ripped her private parts" after she had climbed to get a biscuit in August 2017.

Medics alerted police to the girl's injuries after they treated her at Whipps Cross Hospital, in Leytonstone.

She "lost a significant amount of blood as a result of the injuries they had delivered and inflicted on her", jurors were told.

'Sickening offence'

While the parents were on bail, police searched the mother's home and said they found evidence of "witchcraft".

Prosecutor Caroline Carberry QC said two cow tongues were "bound in wire with nails and a small blunt knife" embedded in them.

Forty limes and other fruit were found with pieces of paper with names written on them stuffed inside, including those of police officers and a social worker involved in the investigation.

"These people were to 'shut up' and 'freeze their mouths'," Ms Carberry said.

"There was a jar with a picture of a social worker in pepper found hidden behind the toilet in the bathroom," she added.

It is only the fourth FGM prosecution brought to court in the UK. The previous cases led to acquittals.

FGM campaigner Aneeta Prem, from Freedom Charity, said convictions were hard to secure because cuttings were "hidden in secrecy".

"People are scared to come forward, professionals are scared to come forward to report this," she told the BBC.

"The fact that we have a conviction today is a really historic moment."

Home Secretary Sajid Javid said FGM was a "medieval practice".

"We will not tolerate FGM and not rest until perpetrators of this horrific crime are brought to justice," he added.

Lynette Woodrow, from the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), said the "sickening" offence had been committed against a victim with "no power to resist or fight back".

"We can only imagine how much pain this vulnerable young girl suffered and how terrified she was," she said.

"Her mother then coached her to lie to the police so she wouldn't get caught, but this ultimately failed."

Ms Woodrow said FGM victims were often affected physically and emotionally for "their entire life".

The mother was born in Uganda but has lived in the UK for a number of years. FGM is banned in both countries, the CPS said.

Mayor of London Sadiq Khan said the conviction sent "a clear message to those who practise this barbaric act".

"Every woman and girl should be safe and feel safe wherever they are in London, and we will continue our fight to end FGM with every power we have," he added.

UK and US border officials join forces in bid to tackle female genital mutilation

Information from airport interviews to be shared as part of Anglo-US drive to protect potential victims

By Rebecca Ratcliffe

The Guardian (07.09.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2It99Ng> - British police and border security will share intelligence on female genital mutilation with US counterparts as part of a drive to increase prosecutions and prevent abuse.

Information on flight paths and investigations will be shared between the UK authorities and US agencies, including the FBI and Department of Homeland Security.

"We do a lot of work with the US anyway in terms of serious and organised crime – it's one of the best relationships we have. If they [US agencies] have an investigation, intelligence, or tactics that they've used, we'll be able to share that," Ivan Balhatchet, National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) lead for FGM.

There are elements of organised crime involved in FGM, Balhatchet said, but under-reporting and a lack of intelligence are major barriers for security services.

"There are cutters, who are being paid," he said. "People are being paid to commit child abuse. In any other walk of life you would call that organised crime. It's not all like that – there's [also] inter-familial [abuse]."

In May, campaigners welcomed news of two forced marriage convictions in one week. But while FGM has been illegal in the UK for more than three decades, there has not yet been a successful prosecution.

Between January and March this year, there were 1,030 newly recorded cases of FGM in England, according to NHS figures. Figures from the NPCC show that FGM protection orders, which safeguard actual or potential victims under civil law, were granted 220 times between 2015, when they were introduced, to the end of March 2018.

A pilot project investigating how to improve the effectiveness of these orders, which until recently were not collated centrally, has been launched by the Ministry of Justice and the NPCC.

FGM is believed to be taking place both abroad and in the UK, with Border Force staff also tracking suspicious packages. "Sometimes you'll see beads used for ceremonies, razor blades, or different liquids, sometimes you might see sanitary towels," said Amanda Read, national operational lead for safeguarding at the Border Force, who said staff routinely look for indicators of FGM.

To mark the agreement with US agencies, officers held intelligence-gathering operations at airports across the UK, as well as JFK Airport in New York.

Teams from Operation Limelight, which aims to raise awareness at airports and is carried out by border officials, police and charities, targeted inbound flights from countries where FGM and forced marriage are prevalent.

Staff look for anything unusual – a person's demeanour, if they are uncomfortable walking, or if someone else is holding their passport.

During an operation at Heathrow on Thursday, specialist teams identified three people who might be at risk. Their names, addresses and school details will be forwarded to local agencies such as social services. A six-year-old girl's details were taken for referral after staff found that she couldn't or wouldn't speak to them.

Polly Harrar, founder of the Sharan Project, which supports survivors of forced marriages and "honour crimes", said that while teams will focus on particular flights, they approach all travellers so that no community feels they are being singled out.

Speaking from Heathrow, where she was assisting Operation Limelight, she said there should be a far greater focus on prevention. "Part of that is education, part of it is sustainable working within community, so that it's community-led, not dictated," she added.

One mother, Afuwa, who arrived in the UK with her family following a holiday in Uganda, said she welcomed efforts by agencies to raise awareness. She said she was aware of communities practising FGM in northern Uganda. "That's their culture," she said, although she added that it is not something her family believes in.

Dr Leyla Hussein, a trained psychotherapist and founder of the Dahlia project, a counselling service for FGM survivors, said survivors needed existing support was sporadic and needed to be greatly improved.

"We still don't have safe houses that girls can go to. They usually end up in hospital by themselves, extremely isolated, and they end up going back to their families anyway," said Hussein.

"The moment you go against parents you have gone against all your wider family. The battle will just get bigger. We need to ensure they have care."

UK schoolgirls pressured into FGM, campaigner says

British schoolgirls have been pressured by their fellow students into having female genital mutilation, a campaigner against the practice has said.

BBC (07.09.2018) - <https://bbc.in/2wPHZfd> - Leyla Hussein said girls are vulnerable as some see it as a cultural practice despite it being a crime in the UK.

Her warning came as British and US agencies signed an agreement to step up co-operation in tackling FGM.

A police commander said intelligence has to date been "woeful" and the lack of a UK conviction was unacceptable.

Commander Ivan Balhatchet from the National Police Chiefs' Council is appealing to the public, support groups and those who work with children to pass information to police.

The proclamation between law enforcement agencies on both sides of the Atlantic - including the NPCC, the Metropolitan Police, Border Force, the FBI, and the US Department of Homeland Security - pledges to better share intelligence and best practice on identifying victims and prosecuting perpetrators.

It is hoped the new agreement will improve existing operations at airports including London Heathrow and JFK in New York and help spot victims as they are taken to parts of the world to be cut, such as North Africa and the Middle East.

'The pressure is still there'

Dr Hussein, a psychotherapist who had FGM in Somalia when she was aged seven, is backing the UK and US efforts.

She said: "The pressure is still there... some of my clients are 19-year-old girls now who were children or were born in this [country] and they will say to you they were pressured in a playground in a school in London to go and have it done."

Dr Hussein, who moved to the UK aged 12 but said she did not know FGM was wrong until years later, said "education plays a big part, in terms of prevention, because I said if I had some information in my school I might have said something".

She founded the north London-based Dahlia Project to raise awareness and support FGM victims.

NHS figures in England recorded between April 2015 and March 2018 show more than 16,000 women and girls have undergone FGM at some point in their lives.

The 6,195 cases recorded between April 2017 and March this year involved 150 people who were born in the UK and 1,715 born in eastern Africa.

FGM has been illegal in the UK since 1985 and further legislation in 2003 and 2005 made it an offence to arrange FGM outside the country for British citizens or permanent residents. But there is yet to be a successful prosecution.

The government has put increasing efforts into tackling FGM in recent years and it is compulsory for family doctors, hospitals and mental health trusts to report any new cases in their patients.

UK: FGM: More than 5,000 newly-recorded cases in England

BBC (04.07.2017) - <http://bbc.in/2sIqsAK> - The NHS in England recorded 5,391 new cases of female genital mutilation (FGM) in the past year, data reveals.

Almost half involved women and girls living in London, NHS Digital found.

A third were women and girls born in Somalia, while 112 cases were UK-born nationals.

The practice is illegal in the UK and it is compulsory for family doctors, hospitals and mental health trusts to report any new cases in their patients.

FGM - intentionally altering or injuring the female external genitalia for non-medical reasons - carries a sentence of up to 14 years in jail.

It is the second time that NHS Digital has released annual FGM figures for England.

Most of the cases were spotted by midwives and doctors working in maternity and obstetric units.

The majority had originally had FGM done to them abroad and as a young child.

Funding concerns

The NSPCC says more should be done to end the practice: "FGM is child abuse. Despite being illegal for over 30 years, too many people are still being subjected to it and it is right that health services have started to properly record evidence of this horrendous practice.

"It takes courage to report concerns as many feel ashamed or worry they will betray friends and family. But we need to end the silence that surrounds FGM to better protect children."

The National FGM Centre, which is run by the children's charity Barnardo's and the Local Government Association (LGA), tries to prevent the practice, but its director Michelle Lee-Izu is warning it could be at risk of closure if government funding is withdrawn.

Cllr Simon Blackburn, from the LGA, said the government "must act now" to secure the National FGM Centre's "long-term future" by providing guaranteed funding.

He said: "Social work provision to girls and families affected by FGM has been quickly and significantly improved through the intervention of Centre social workers, embedded in council safeguarding teams, and hundreds of referrals have been received in areas that previously only recorded a handful of cases each year.

Mr Blackburn added that the government needed to back its commitment to ending FGM in the UK "with the long-term funding required to make that vision a reality".

Grassroots reporting

Anyone concerned about someone who has suffered, or is at risk of FGM, can contact the NSPCC FGM Helpline anonymously on 0800 028 3550 or visit nspcc.org.uk.

Wendy Preston, from the Royal College of Nursing, said: "Mandatory reporting and compulsory sex-and-relationships education are important weapons in the fight against FGM, and school nurses play a vital role in both educating children and young women, and spotting those who may be at risk.

"The government must act to attract and retain school nurses, to help address the problem at grassroots level, and maintain momentum in the fight to eradicate FGM."

A government spokesman said the start-up money for the centre came from the £200m Children's Social Care Innovation Programme, and was designed to lead to self-sustaining work, not ongoing core funding.

But he added: "Protecting women and girls from violence and supporting victims is a key priority for this government and a personal priority for the Minister for Women and Equalities, Justine Greening."

UK: No prosecutions for female genital mutilation in Britain, so what is the problem?

The first-ever medical documentation of female genital mutilation cases in England found at least 5,000 cases from April 2015 to March 2016. Despite strict laws in the country, no prosecution has succeeded so far.

By Rhona Scullion

Pass Blue (03.10.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2e9WfnB> - Female genital mutilation has been illegal in England and Wales since 1985. Scotland has similar but separate legislation. Much more comprehensive laws forbidding the practice were introduced in 2003 and again in 2015, creating additional safeguards and stringent punishments for those practicing FGM, as it is known. Yet no one in Britain has successfully been prosecuted for the crime, which suggests that programs to prevent the procedure are failing.

Many reasons account for the lack of prosecution, experts have explained, including the reluctance of family members to report on one another if the procedure is being practiced and the enduring cultural sensitivity of the topic. Globally, revised legal frameworks and growing political support to end FGM have not led to more successful prosecutions either, despite laws against the practice in 26 countries in Africa and the Middle East, as well as in 33 other countries with migrant populations from FGM-practicing countries.

In July 2016, the first-ever recorded figures for the number of FGM cases in England were released, showing that from April 2015 to March 2016, 5,702 cases were documented in England alone, according to NHS Digital, formerly known as the Health and Social Care Information Center, a government body. (Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have not collected figures on rates of FGM separately.) The highest rate of FGM is occurring in London, according to a City University London report in 2015.

Most of the women and girls in the time frame of April 2015 to March 2016 were cut abroad, primarily in Africa, but 43 were born in Britain, with at least 18 cut inside the country. Government figures estimate that 170,000 girls and women living in Britain have undergone excision, as it is also called, and that 65,000 girls under age 13 risk being subjected to it.

Female genital mutilation is a cultural practice that has no medical basis. It is a procedure that intentionally alters or causes injury to female genital organs, according to the World Health Organization, and spans vast geographic areas and different religions and is not condoned by any holy book. It is most commonly carried out in about 29 countries of Africa, some nations in the Middle East and parts of Asia. Somalia, in east Africa, has the highest rate, accounting for a third of all new cases.

Diaspora groups from many of the countries where it is practiced are the most likely to practice FGM in Britain, the UN says, as well as in Australia, Canada and the United States. South America has recorded female circumcision activity in Colombia, Ecuador and Peru.

The World Health Organization describes four types of FGM, with degrees of severity, involving the partial or total removal of external female genitalia. The reasons given for the practice are generally related to ideas of purity and chastity, and it can be seen as a prerequisite for marriage in some cultures, ensuring a woman's virginity. Ignorance or dismissal of related health issues it creates — it can even kill in some circumstances — abounds in those who carry it out.

Yet despite greater social and political awareness of the problem and proof that it is inflicted on British citizens, perpetrators remain unpunished, a situation that has been condemned by advocates campaigning against the practice.

"It is shocking girls born in the UK are still subjected to FGM, despite the practice being illegal here for more than 30 years," said Celia Jeffreys, the head of the National FGM Center, a British public-private entity, to PassBlue.

The failure to produce a single prosecution has induced more government pressure on the Crown Prosecution Service, the principal prosecuting authority for England and Wales, acting independently in criminal cases investigated by the police and others. In 2014, four days before members of the British Parliament were due to question Alison Saunders, the director of public prosecutions as the head of the Crown Prosecution Service, the organization announced it was bringing the first ever charges of FGM against two men, one of whom was a medical doctor. In 2015, both men, however, were cleared of all charges within 30 minutes by jurors in a case that was later deemed a "show trial" by the media.

"There are a number of reasons which affect the prosecution of FGM cases, including the age and vulnerability of victims who may be too scared to report the offence or give evidence in court against their family," a spokesman for the Crown Prosecution Service told PassBlue. "The law has been strengthened to encourage victims to come forward, including giving them lifelong anonymity, being able to give evidence via video or from behind a screen and it is now mandatory for teachers and doctors to report instances of FGM in girls under 18."

The mandatory reporting requirement has been imposed on everyone working in regulated professions, such as teachers and health care workers, since 2015. The duty, however, is narrow in scope and requires professionals only to notify the police about instances of FGM they "discover" on girls under age 18.

Mandatory reporting does not refer to cases where a girl might be at risk of FGM or where FGM has not yet been performed; it also does not apply to cases where a woman older than 18 undergoes female cutting. This gap, advocates say, is important, as these numbers may have a crucial impact on gathering data on those more likely to be at risk.

Jeffreys also pointed to the vulnerability of FGM victims as a crucial barrier to prosecution, saying: "Successful prosecutions of perpetrators are complex, as many of them are family members, making it even harder for survivors to come forward."

Other barriers to successful prosecution can be found in the enduring misunderstanding of female genital cutting in both the public sphere and the specific communities in which it is condoned.

The Crown Prosecution Service noted that it could consider only a charge and prosecution after the police have investigated and referred a case of suspected FGM to the service. If the police do not have enough evidence or are not fully informed of the relevant signs to look for regarding excision, the likelihood of the police referring a case is greatly decreased.

Additionally, the prevailing focus of both anti-FGM campaigners and law enforcers now seems to have shifted to protection and prevention, rather than prosecution. Many activists think that punishment is actually a sign of failure of the national campaign against FGM and that prosecution comes too late.

Adwoa Kwateng-Kluytse leads the partnerships and global advocacy program at Forward (Foundation for Women's Health Research and Development), a British-based, African diaspora campaign and charity focused on gender equality and upholding the rights of African women and girls. She spoke with PassBlue about prosecution being a belated step.

"The lack of a successful prosecution doesn't condone the practice," Kwateng-Kluytse said. "Getting to the point of prosecution means Forward has failed, the law has failed, as a girl has been subjected to FGM — something she will have to live with for the rest of her life."

As to why there has not been a successful prosecution in Britain, Kwateng-Kluytse responded by asking, "How many girls have been saved because of existing legislation?"

This question is particularly pertinent amid the new FGM protection orders that were introduced in the 2015 legislation, called the Serious Crime Act. These orders allow courts wide powers to protect those deemed at risk of undergoing FGM. Judges can revoke passports to prevent parents leaving the country and having their child cut abroad; and they can restrict access to the child or even order the child be taken into state care. Additionally, it is now an offense to fail to protect a girl from FGM if a person has parental responsibility of the child.

Jeffreys highlighted in a Guardian article that authorities needed to be "braver" and more proactive in using these new protections, given that only 18 FGM orders were used in the first three months of their being implemented. Jeffreys pointed to the need for better cooperation and education on the subject, saying, "Professionals working in education, health and social care need to be better at communicating with each other, to ensure girls at risk are spotted and those who've already been affected by FGM get the necessary support to bring perpetrators to justice."

Several reasons for the hesitant response from many authorities have been suggested. First, there remains a stubborn ignorance of both FGM itself in British society and whether it even occurs. Second, the cultural nature of the practice presents a sensitivity aspect to the issue.

Valentine Nkoyo was a victim of FGM and now runs the Mojatu Foundation in Nottingham, England, which aims to empower women and girls through media, health and education. She told PassBlue, "I think there has been fear, especially among professionals, of not wanting to be seen as racists interfering with other people's 'culture.' "

Yet she was adamant that cultural sensitivities should not undermine the fight to eradicate the practice, saying, "I strongly feel if we all look at this as a purely form of child abuse that violates the rights of girls and women, we can confidently tackle FGM from that angle."

More emphasis is being placed on education and the importance of work in communities practicing FGM — most of which occurs in the country's largest cities, such as Manchester, Birmingham and London boroughs — with many campaigners thinking this is crucial to securing a successful prosecution. Nkoyo thinks that both education and prosecution are needed in equal measure to tackle FGM fully.

"Education and strong laws play a very important role if they go hand in hand, as there is a potential danger to push the issue underground by focusing only on prosecuting without trying to get communities on board," she said.

Kwateng-Kluytse noted, "More importantly, families and communities need to be made aware of the UK law on FGM, so that we do not end up prosecuting people who are practicing social norms in ignorance."

As to whether the law is effective enough, Kwateng-Kluytse said that not enough research has been done and that it would be useful to get information from social services, health departments and education departments if they were tracking FGM cases separately, she said.

Laws on FGM should focus, she said, "on the trauma the girl has gone through, looking at providing support and services to her" and not on merely securing a prosecution.

Echoing Nkoyo, she said, "It [FGM] is important because it is not a mainstream issue, so communities must be fully aware of UK position, but we should respond to it as we do to any other child abuse case."
