

Brussels, 13 May 2020

To Ms Ursula von der Leyen,
President of the European Commission,

To Charles Michel,
President of the European Council,

Subject: EU and Member States must address COVID-19 impact on women, girls, underserved and vulnerable groups, and protect their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)

Dear President of the European Commission,

Dear President of the European Council,

The COVID-19 pandemic is having a devastating impact on people everywhere, claiming lives and undermining health and well-being. As European societies deal with the frontline response to the crisis, and look to the long road of recovery ahead, it is apparent that COVID-19 is exacerbating existing inequalities. Europe cannot afford to let these go unaddressed; the consequences for women, girls, underserved and vulnerable groups in particular, would be catastrophic. EU leaders have committed to placing solidarity, resilience and sustainability at the heart of their response to the pandemic. To achieve this, they must protect the health and safety of those at greatest risk.

Women are at the forefront of the response to the crisis, representing 70% of the health and social workforce globally, and undertaking most of the household work and caretaking responsibilities. They are also the most at risk of unemployment and poverty in times of crises and underrepresented in decision-making spaces. Lockdowns have led to an alarming increase of domestic violence, and by their very nature, make it much more difficult for women and children experiencing violence at the hands of family members to escape and get support.

COVID-19 and its consequences are also endangering the sexual and reproductive health and safety of women, girls, underserved and vulnerable groups across Europe and globally. Sexual and reproductive health (SRH) care has been restricted in most countries. Many care-providers have closed facilities or reduced numbers of staff or services provided. Women are experiencing increased difficulties in accessing contraceptive and abortion care, and detection and treatment of STI/HIV and reproductive cancers. Childbirth experiences are being disrupted. A global supply chain crisis might also result in shortages of SRH commodities.

In these unprecedented times, we call on you as Presidents of the European Commission and the European Council, to do everything in your power to protect people's health and lives, and work towards building a more equal, just, and safe Europe for all. It goes without saying that individual Member States must refrain from exploiting the pandemic to consolidate authoritarian power, to weaken democracy and the rule of law, or to trample on human rights, including women's reproductive freedom and the rights of transgender people. Collectively, the EU should not tolerate any such abuses.

Civil society is an essential partner to EU leaders in delivering a Europe that cares for all. Women's rights groups, shelters for survivors of domestic violence, and organisations working for sexual and reproductive health and rights, play a key role in realising human rights and protecting the health and safety of those whose needs are greatest. Critical programmes must not be derailed, now or during the recovery period. Sufficient, flexible and continued financial support from the EU and its Member States to civil society remains essential.

Given the disproportionate harm the crisis will cause to women, girls and underserved groups, we call on the EU and its Member States to prioritise their needs more than ever. An intersectional and gender-sensitive approach is required, with proactive and targeted measures. **Essential, time-sensitive, and potentially life-saving services** must continue to be provided to all during and after the crisis. This includes **services for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, and sexual and reproductive healthcare.**

- We call on the EU to support Member States in their efforts to **maintain the provision of these essential services**, through funding and sharing of best practices. Any EU actions aiming to support the strengthening of health systems or promote public health must include **sexual and reproductive health**, as an integral part of health.
- When designing the **Recovery Plan** and **revised MFF proposal**, we ask the EU to continue to **prioritise gender equality, women's rights including SRHR, human rights, and support to civil society organisations that defend these values, both within and outside the EU.** The Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme, the Health strand of the European Social Fund Plus, and the NDICI are essential instruments in this regard.
- We ask the EU, as the biggest development aid donor, to continue to **prioritize global solidarity**, by maintaining sufficient levels of ODA funding and supporting partner countries to respond to the crisis in a comprehensive manner, including the strengthening of health systems and universal access to SRHR as part of Universal Health Coverage.
- We also call on the European Commission to **avoid delaying initiatives aimed to improve gender equality and protect human rights** in its annual Work Programme, including the renewal of the Gender Action Plan, or the implementation of the Gender Equality Strategy.

We would be happy to provide any further details or support that would be of assistance and will be on hand for any specific queries. Please find our more detailed recommendations [here](#).

The EU and its Member States have an essential role to play in mitigating the disproportionate burden of the COVID-19 pandemic on women and girls. We count on you to ensure that Europe steps up and truly places solidarity and equality at the heart of its response, now and in the future.

Yours sincerely,

Caroline Hickson

Regional Director, International Planned Parenthood Federation European Network (IPPF EN)