



23 June 2021

'You'll never walk alone' - our message to women

Every 15 minutes, somewhere in the world a woman dies following complications from an illegal abortion.

This is roughly 60,000 deaths each year due to abortion bans. The deaths and serious injuries from these abortions are almost all preventable through sexuality education, contraception and safe, legal procedures.

In Europe, we have made enormous progress, thanks to the feminist movement.

However, Malta still prohibits abortion in all circumstances and Poland only allows the termination of a pregnancy when a mother's life is at risk or it is a result of rape.

Worryingly, a backlash on women's rights is gaining momentum, eroding existing rights and endangering women's health. Extreme-right activists and anti-gender movements cannot stand increasingly independent and powerful women. The right to legal abortion is a key target of their attacks.

As progressive members of the European Parliament, we have been under attack too.

Almost a decade ago we called on MEPs to adopt a resolution recommending that legal and safe abortion procedures be available across the EU. Anti-choice organisations reacted furiously. We were flooded with petitions, threats, social media attacks and spam emails calling for MEPs to reject the resolution. Some received over 80,000 emails in a matter of days in the lead up to the vote.

This massive anti-choice campaign derailed our efforts. A conservative-led resolution was adopted instead stating that sexual and reproductive health and rights fall under the national competences.

This Thursday (24 June) we have a chance to correct this and clearly stand side-by-side with Europe's women. In [this week's resolution](#), we will vote to make it crystal clear that sexual and reproductive health rights are human rights and must be guaranteed for everyone, without discrimination.

It includes a clear call for sexuality education in all primary and secondary schools, access to contraceptives and to safe and legal abortion. In the 21st century, all European women must have the right to decide over their bodies. Access to medical care and reproductive rights is not a

question of ideology but health. It is time national governments remove any obstacles to legal abortion.

The huge mobilisation against our efforts eight years ago taught us that hard-won rights are not won forever.

There will always be people who want to take them back.

We saw this in Poland when the ultra-conservative Law and Justice (PiS) government took steps to criminalise sexuality education for minors and introduced the need for a prescription to get the "day-after" pill. Last year mid-pandemic, a PiS-controlled tribunal delivered a ruling that essentially banned abortion, by criminalising it even in the case of severe foetal defects.

'You'll never walk alone' solidarity

Hundreds of thousands of brave Polish women took to the streets, repeating the message "you will never walk alone". We will not rest until Polish women enjoy the same rights as French, Spanish or Belgian women.

During the pandemic, many women and girls around the world were denied sexual and reproductive health care falsely deemed a lower priority.

Early in the pandemic, the Hungarian government suspended almost all surgical abortions with a ban on non-life-saving procedures. While a few countries, such as France and Portugal, facilitated some abortion procedures, the response from a majority of countries was too little or too late.

Legal restrictions do not result in fewer abortions.

Instead they force women into risking their lives by seeking out unsafe clandestine services. According to the Guttmacher Institute, the abortion rate is 37 per 1,000 people in countries that prohibit abortion, and 34 per 1,000 people in countries that broadly allow for abortion. There is almost no difference.

In the EU, women often travel to other member states for an abortion. This is only an option for women with economic means so once again it is the poorest women who are hardest hit. Only reliable sexuality education and universal access to contraception can reduce abortion numbers.

Last year, the contraceptive pill celebrated its 60th anniversary. It is popular in Europe but only France and Belgium offer effective reimbursement schemes for contraception. Others should follow. And other contraceptive methods, too, including contraceptives for men.

'Totalitarianism'

We also need high quality sexuality education so that our children develop a healthy and positive attitude towards their bodies, their sexuality and relationships. We condemn the recent laws in Hungary that ban content in schools deemed to promote homosexuality and gender change as it stigmatises an already vulnerable LGBTI community. And we must double our efforts to fight violence against women.

Olga Tokarczuk, Nobel prizewinning Polish writer said: "Motherhood holds its sense only when the decision about becoming a mother is made by an individual with the right to free and responsible choice. A state that claims the right to decide on the body, health and lives of 50 percent of its citizens - it is a totalitarian state."

Those who attack us so loudly today are opposed to women and their right to choose. They want to rule over women and restrict their freedoms. This time they will not intimidate us. This time, we trust the European Parliament will be there for women.

AUTHOR BIO

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