



EUROPEAN WOMEN'S
LOBBY
EUROPEEN DES FEMMES

Women must not pay the price for COVID-19!

**Putting equality between women and men
at the heart of the response to COVID-19
across Europe**

**European Women's Lobby Policy Brief
April 2020**

Introduction

In the current global context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Women's Lobby (EWL) recognises the significant and long-term impacts this health crisis will have for all across Europe and beyond, and that this will disproportionately be shouldered by women and girls.

The deepest impact of the crisis will be on those women and girls who face multiple forms of discrimination on the basis of sex compounded with other factors including race or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age, sexual orientation, class, and/or migration status.

In this moment there are particular women and girls who are made vulnerable by our system:

- Women who are the sole caretaker of their household, and those in situations of isolation and economic insecurity;
- Women who are at risk of intimate partner violence at home, those who do not have a safe home or are living in shelters, or those who are affected by prostitution including victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation;
- Women who are living in facilities where self-isolation is impossible such as shelters, substandard asylum seeking camps or centres while their experiences of male violence are intensified;
- Women who may already be experiencing exclusion in our societies such as older women, Roma women, migrant and/or undocumented women, homeless women, women with disabilities, women with precarious employment, and women in prisons;
- Women who require care and assistance.

At EWL, **our heartfelt solidarity goes out to all those affected and to the people - overwhelmingly women - who are leading the provision of care and support to protect everyone in society at this moment.** We have been continuously awed by the levels of community engagement, solidarity and collective approaches to responding to this crisis. Now it is **crucial that EU Member States and the European Commission step up to act in solidarity across the continent and to protect women from bearing the burden of the crisis and to use this moment to realise a turning point for our societies.**

Below we set out insights from EWL's membership thanks to the input from the EWL Board across Europe and our recommendations during the current pandemic and for the future, in the following key areas:

1. [Supporting equality and protecting our democratic principles](#)
2. [Combatting male violence](#)
3. [Realising feminist economics](#)
4. [Building an equal health system](#)
5. Recommendations to [Member States](#) and the [European Commission](#)

We can see now more clearly than ever that what matters most in our world is our communities; ensuring **we hold care at the centre of our value system, and ensuring the 'social floor' is raised so that social and economic security is provided for everyone as a priority while ending violence against women and girls**, for the good of all.

1. Equality between women and men and democratic principles must be at the core of national responses to the COVID-19 crisis

This is a critical moment in which the resilience and effective implementation of the European Commission's recently released **Gender Equality Strategy** will be essential to ensuring the protection of women's and girl's human rights. In these singular circumstances, this Strategy is imperative to establishing minimum standards to ensure equality between women and men. Special measures must be implemented to **ensure we do not let the current crisis diminish the possible impact of the Strategy, and must recognise that it is more relevant and important than ever for transformative change.**

We applaud governments' responses to this public health crisis, by providing emergency measures to compensate the loss of income and relief for payments in housing, mortgages, loans, etc. for individuals as well as small and medium-sized enterprises, as the examples from Member States in this briefing demonstrate. **We also welcome the European Commission's approval to suspend the strict criteria of the European Stability Pact. This will allow countries, especially in the Eurozone, to make essential investments in public services and support, following 10 years of austerity, which has most severely impacted women and girls.**

Many governments have been granted special powers to pursue these measures in the short term, and in the absence of newly elected governments following recent elections. While many of these measures are accepted given the current specific needs, we must nonetheless remain vigilant. Our democratic systems could become fragile in the absence of stringent democratic accountability and transparency mechanisms, and so **we must ensure any such measures have a clear end date.** Women's access to our rights are at risk of further regression or harm without this.

Delays and/or postponement of democratic elections, reinforcement of political mandates, the extension of special powers to, for example, law enforcement agencies, **must be short term solutions with a clear end date** and acceptable only as a direct response to the public health crisis. Instead, political leaders must seize this opportunity to ensure we strengthen our democratic processes, recognising the value of citizen engagement and women's roles, and bringing forward the message that the **community care we have seen as the major success in this pandemic, can also bring longer lasting change especially when women's voices are valued through democratic participation.**

EWL calls on **EU Member States to ensure that women are given the space to be heard and equally represented in decision-making processes and women's civil society organisations are consulted** when developing and implementing local, national and European responses and plans for systems redesign and renewal. These responses must include **gender mainstreaming**, particularly in the delivery, monitoring and evaluation of gender responsive public services and emergency stimulus packages, and **must be grounded in care and mutual protection of society and women's human rights.** Furthermore, these responses must be informed by **accurate and streamlined national methods of designing and collecting sex-disaggregated data** that captures all diverse backgrounds and contexts for women and girls across the EU.

EU Member States must ensure that **women's organisations who provide essential services to women and girls at risk are adequately funded** during this crisis and beyond. *In most countries in the EU, EWL is aware of the substantial decrease in State funding to women's organisations who provide essential services to defend the human rights of women and girls and the projected risks of these*

organisations closing down. The EU and its Member States must further ensure that women's organisations do not carry the burden of any economic setbacks resulting from this crisis.

Temporary special measures must be introduced to protect women from facing the brunt of these austerity measures, and ensure that in future times of economic recession such measures are never again considered, recognising the harm they do to the stability and sustainability of positive social structures. EU Member States and the European Commission must take this opportunity to ensure that the upcoming **Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027** includes **women's perspectives, that their rights are streamlined across all areas through gender budgeting, and that adequate resources are provided to women's organisations throughout.**

2. Tackling the surge of male violence against women and girls is a matter of emergency

A world free from violence against women and girls is a fundamental right that must be made into a lived reality. There has been a notable increase of male violence against women and girls in many areas, evidenced through nationally available data and attested to by our members. *In France, the Ministry of Interior indicated an increase of reports between 32% and 36% in the Paris region alone.¹ In Germany's capital Berlin, the police reported an increase of 10% of cases, while shelters in Italy reported a 50% drop in reports due to the severity of the lockdown making seeking assistance even harder. A member in Ireland reported a five-fold increase in domestic violence orders sought and a huge increase in contacts from women living in rural communities.*

While men's violence against women is a long-term systemic issue across Europe², lockdown and isolation measures creates an enabling environment for abusers' coercive control of victims and lead to more incidents of physical, psychological and sexual violence. Women and girls who are victims of intimate partner violence and sexual violence are confined at home, or in institutional settings, with their abusers, with less possibilities of seeking help without further endangering their lives. Despite the increased danger, women and girls risk having limited access to critical support services and safe shelters during this crisis.

EU Member States must ensure that shelters for women and girls who are victims of male violence, for homeless women and for asylum seeking women, remain open with the appropriate measures taken to protect women and workers in these shelters from the spread of the virus. Urgent funding should be provided to frontline support service providers given the tremendous increase in risk of harm. Common standards for data collection must be made mandatory and standardised across all EU Member States, to ensure that sex-disaggregated data on male violence against all women and girls is made available, particularly to inform emergency responses and plans for redesign and renewal of our systems post COVID.

¹ https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2020/03/27/confinement-un-dispositif-d-alerte-dans-les-pharmacies-pour-les-femmes-violentees_6034583_3224.html#xtor=AL-32280270

² For more information, see our factsheet, [Disrupting the Continuum of Violence Against Women and Girls](#)

A higher risk of female genital mutilation (FGM) should be acknowledged as it can go undetected with children off school. Those at risk of incest and/or so-called 'honour-based' violence may be in lockdown with family members who are a threat to them.

Women exploited by the sex industry, who are always exposed to insecurity and situations of violence and exploitation, are significantly **at risk of further exploitation and violence and should receive adequate consideration and support in this moment through clear access to health, social and financial supports without risk due to migration status**. Proactive outreach also should be made for women in controlled situations, such as increased actions against trafficking. To avoid recurrence of these risks in any future crises, the Equality Model must be adopted and implemented decriminalising all those affected by prostitution, ensuring they can seek support and access specialised health, housing and recovery supports, while criminalising those driving the exploitation: 'buyers', traffickers and pimps.³

Governments must ensure that protection services and mechanisms are in place and running to support all women and girls who are victims of male violence and exploitation. Now is the time to implement more fully than ever the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, the Istanbul Convention.⁴

Good practice examples to prevent further risk to victims of male violence

Strong measures should be taken by EU Member States to reinforce systems and services to protect women and girls against violence. *In **Austria**, the Federal Minister for Women and Integration decided on the expansion and financial support for women and girls affected by violence in times of the crises.*⁵ *In **Germany** the Federal Minister for women's rights together with her colleagues in the 16 Federal states agreed upon a package of 10 immediate measures to increase the protection from men's violence against women and girls.*⁶

It is also imperative that, as in **Spain**,⁷ *services for support and protection of victims of male violence are declared an essential service so that they can keep running at the same capacity during the crisis. In Spain, new space for emergency shelters has also been made available in response to the crisis.*⁸

Any additional measures must be wide-ranging and not rely only on digital solutions, as access is not guaranteed, particularly in cases of intimate partner violence where digital tools or restricted access to digital technologies is an aspect of psychological violence. *In **Spain and France**, a campaign has been launched to advertise an alert mechanism for women to seek help in pharmacies.*⁹ *In **Ireland**, policing services are reaching out to former victims of domestic violence to ensure their wellbeing.*¹⁰ *In **Italy**, Telefono Rosa, an Italian anti-violence NGO, reported a decrease of 55.1% of calls in the first two weeks of March compared to those of the same period last year. A special app has been developed in*

³ As set out in the campaign Brussels' Call: Together for a Europe Free from Prostitution, which EWL co-founded:

https://womenlobby.org/IMG/pdf/brussels_call_brochure_8_pages.pdf

⁴ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/>

⁵ <https://www.frauenring.at/opferschutz-corona-krise-ausgebaut>

⁶ <https://www.bmfsfj.de/bmfsfj/konkrete-hilfsmassnahmen-mit-den-bundeslaendern-verabredet/154102>

⁷ <https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/serviciosdeprensa/notasprensa/igualdad/Paginas/2020/170320-covid-viogen.aspx>

⁸ In view of the increased risk of male violence against women, temporary accommodation for victims has been arranged by the Government in hotel rooms or touristic apartments not in use at the moment.

⁹ See example of the Mask-19 campaign in [Spain](#) and [France](#), a coded word women can use to seek for help in pharmacies as one of the few social spaces women in abusive situations could access.

¹⁰ Further information [here](#).

order to provide women the opportunity to get immediately in touch with law enforcement units without having to call the helpline.

Awareness raising campaigns should be developed and targeted to victims of different forms of violence, as is already happening in a number of Member States, **to ensure that they have information about the services that they can access for emergency protection and support.**¹¹ These campaigns, run in cooperation with women's NGOs, should reiterate that prosecution and protection measures are still being applied by law enforcement units despite the exceptional circumstances. In Italy, the government has promoted a media campaign to stress the permanent functioning of helplines and shelters.

Law enforcement units should make clear that they are still operating and are especially attentive to the early identification of women victims. Protection measures (such as emergency **barring orders and restraining and protection orders**) against the perpetrators should still be issued.¹² Suspension or delay of court proceedings are causing significant distress to victims as the abusers are not held accountable. Court proceedings for cases of male violence should be granted to ensure access to justice and avoid risk of re-victimisation.

In the longer term, we must use this moment to recognise that our current **political responses have been insufficient in recognising the inequality, harassment and violence so many women face on a daily basis.** To ensure Governments never again leave women and girls in such situations of risk and vulnerability, we must work together between political partners, frontline services, advocacy groups and crucially those affected, to ensure adequate realisation of the provisions in the Istanbul Convention,¹³ and go even further to bring an end to systematic male violence against women and girls.

3. Now is the moment to move to an economic model which cares for people and the planet

As we see women leading in the provision of frontline and essential services - many of whom are largely underpaid - and balancing care and work responsibilities at home, we are reminded that **women are the backbone of society.** Their invaluable paid and unpaid care work is essential to the wellbeing and functioning of our societies and planet.

Valuing women's invisible contribution to the economy

In the current crisis, the significant care gap between women and men¹⁴ risks being further deepened. Women across Europe are currently stepping up to balance their work responsibilities as they care for and educate their children while schools and nurseries are closed, and care for other family members and dependent persons. Their workload, particularly that of lone mothers, is being doubled. Women's

¹¹ France, Italy, [Portugal](#), [Spain](#), Turkey.

¹² In France [they have ensured that](#) Emergency barring orders, restraining and protection orders against the perpetrators were to be continued despite the lockdown measures.

¹³ [Online petition "Rise up against violence!"](#)

¹⁴ European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), Gender Equality Index 2019.

pensions are also facing additional strains as they support their unemployed dependents. Women in this context are thus at further risk of losing their jobs, their income and their economic independence.

Women undertaking precarious work, women in the catering service, women in the gig economy, women leading small and medium-sized enterprises and freelancers, many of which are lacking access to social protection, are also at risk of losing their jobs. The promotion of teleworking and digital solutions as a response to preventing economic exclusion, the EU and its Member States must ensure this approach does not further harm women with already doubled workloads, or further exclude women living in poverty who are without digital access or literacy.

EU Member States must **provide adequate financial support that extends to women working precarious jobs and takes on board women's experiences, including lump sum payments for qualifying individuals including women with disabilities, tax relief measures and subsidising of essential goods and services. Access to special leave that guarantees 100% of the employee's income must in particular be available to caregivers and to working parents with child responsibilities at home.**

In Latvia, for example, women have been granted mortgage payment breaks and temporary measures have been put in place to ensure late property and land tax payments are not penalised and to ban evictions. In Germany, the government has adopted a stimulus package to provide one-off payments for three months of up to 15,000 euros to small companies and self-employed persons such as carers. In Hungary, taxes have been waived for many affected by business closures, but jobseekers' supports are only available for three months, leaving many women at risk of severe poverty.

In Ireland also, the government has announced a comprehensive income support package to support people to replace their incomes. In the Czech Republic, people with young children under the age of 13 can receive 60% of the salary from the state when taking care of them. This measure also applies to self-employed people. Spain has just adopted a subsidy for job loss after the declaration of a State of Alarm to domestic service workers, almost entirely women. In Belgium, technical unemployment benefits have been made available to 1 million people and covers 70% of the salary, however this does not apply to precarious jobs, mostly conducted by women, working on daily or weekly contracts.

At this moment, we call on EU Member States to provide **gender-responsive social and economic measures** to support women and girls in precarious situations, including those at risk of losing their jobs, are at risk of living in poverty and/or are already experiencing in-work poverty. Specific programmes must be targeted to women working in **the informal economy either as care providers** (i.e. undeclared helpers for all persons at home) **or as freelancers in order to give them access to unemployment benefits**, to ease the burden of formalising their activities in the future. *For example, Italy's Emergency Decree Law no.18 of 17 March 2020 introduces temporary measures for families and women, including the extension of parental leave and bonuses for child carers at home. A lump sum of 600 euros is also being given to almost five million workers, including the self-employed.*

Collective mechanisms of solidarity within and amongst Member States are crucial at this time, including the need to present strong fiscal policies aimed at the redistribution of wealth. Proposals to issue 'corona/Euro bonds' by the European Central Bank, directing 37 billion euros under Cohesion policies, allowing Member States to keep underspent pre-financed structural funds, and loosening the strict criteria of the European Stability Pact to enable public investment by Member States, are all welcomed measures and must be directed to the development of the care economy.

Member States must urgently go further in taking exceptional budgetary measures at the EU level: we must now make sure that public services are supported and prioritised. The EU must also redirect **Cohesion Funds** under the **current Multiannual Financial Framework** (MFF, 2014-2020) to enable Member States to invest in social cohesion, which is crucial as we face uncertainties and long-term socio-economic, health and environmental consequences of the pandemic. A precondition of additional cohesion funding must be to ensure equality between women and men, in compliance with the Lisbon Treaty (Article 2)¹⁵, the **gender mainstreaming** clause of the TFEU (Article 8)¹⁶ and the Charter of Fundamental Rights (Article 23)¹⁷.

Placing care at the centre of our economy

The contribution of women to the economy, often unpaid and undervalued, has never been so visible. As a lesson learned, we call on the EU and its Member States to **rethink ‘equal work for equal value’**, particularly in underpaid, predominantly feminised sectors such as care, education and social services.

This crisis demonstrates the urgency to move beyond an outdated male breadwinner model in which women’s roles are confined to a caretaker role. In looking ahead and beyond the crisis at the lessons learned, the EU and its Member States must **rethink care as a public investment rather than as a matter of public spending.**

The last decade was marked by severe austerity measures which, under the European Stability Pact, prevented Member States from investing in public services including health, often seen to be a ‘cost’ rather than an ‘investment’. It is clear that austerity does not work and has long-term detrimental consequences, particularly on women.

This crisis has demonstrated that care is essential to the sustainability of societies. Developing a **care economy** (as set out in our **Purple Pact**,¹⁸ providing a vision of an economic model that is sustainable and equally beneficial to women and men) requires addressing the low job quality characteristic for the health and care sector across the EU. Low pay, high levels of part-time work and poor working conditions do not reflect the social value of this sector. Piecemeal attempts to address unmet care needs across the life-cycle (for example, the Barcelona targets on child care;¹⁹ the recently adopted Work-Life Balance Directive²⁰ which does not address the issue of pay) do not go far enough. There is now an opportunity to put the care economy at the centre of a sustainable, feminist economic model,

¹⁵ Article 2 of the Lisbon Treaty states: The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.

¹⁶ Article 8 of the TFEU states: In all its activities, the Union shall aim to eliminate inequalities, and to promote equality, between men and women.

¹⁷ Article 23 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights states: Equality between women and men must be ensured in all areas, including employment, work and pay. The principle of equality shall not prevent the maintenance or adoption of measures providing for specific advantages in favour of the under-represented sex.

¹⁸ See EWL’s publication “[Purple Pact: A feminist approach to the economy](#)”, an opportunity to re-think the current macro-economic model and how we measure growth and productivity. The Purple Pact recognises women’s unpaid and invisible work as the backbone of society and argues for a feminist economic model, by placing care at the centre to ensure the wellbeing and sustainability of people and the planet.

¹⁹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/130531_barcelona_en_0.pdf

²⁰ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019L1158>

on an equal footing with the green economy and the digital economy, both of which are highly masculinised and must embed care principles to ensure transformative change. The care economy also has huge job creation potential and ensures working conditions are improved, particularly within the care and health sector, in which there are currently thousands of unfilled positions.

Europe must now take the lead in **investing in the care economy through the next Multiannual Financial Framework (2021-2027)**. Now is the time for the EU to adopt a **Care Deal for Europe** where women and men have equal, flexible options to balance their work and care responsibilities across the life-cycle. The **European Investment Bank** also has a crucial role to play, by ensuring that its 80 billion euro annual budget is directed to investments in the care economy to implement its own Strategy on Gender Equality and Women's Economic Empowerment.²¹

4. Ensuring health is a central priority in all our societies' responses

In this moment of global health crisis, it has become starkly clear what the impact of austerity cutbacks to our healthcare systems in so many Member States has caused. Health is not for sale; it is a basic human right. Good access to permanent health care will also be necessary for many survivors of the pandemic, with permanent health problems, such as breathing issues due to damaged lungs.

Now more than ever, we see the impact of Governments that invest in **healthcare infrastructure, the people who lead in delivering those services, and the equipment needed for all eventualities**. Those Member States with strong healthcare infrastructures are more equipped to deal with responses and continued care for patients whereas those without face additional barriers and costs, including in terms of health and life of citizens. Traditionally, all women and girls across Europe face specific challenges accessing full healthcare to the degree men can.²² Discrimination of older women, Romani women, racialised women, women and girls with disabilities, women and girls affected by prostitution and those with underlying health conditions in accessing health care services cannot be tolerated.

Supporting our healthcare workers in this time of need, and through the future

The majority of those providing the most essential health and care supports in this moment are women. **Women are also at the forefront in providing frontline services and care to those in need, allowing society to continue functioning, and communities to live in self-isolation.**

*In **Germany**, more than 75% of hospital staff are women. Working tirelessly and often without breaks, they earn low paying salaries that is often calculated on a piecework basis. In **Denmark and Ireland**, we have heard about the increased in-take and growing demand for nurses who are being moved into intensive care roles, often including retired and nursing students, and in **Ireland** student nurses are now being paid for their work to respond in this crisis. However, in **Austria, the Netherlands and Romania** women nurses and carers are being stigmatised by the media as playing a role in the increased rates of infection.* Such stigmatisation must be tackled immediately and appropriate recognition of nurses' bravery and commitment to common good acknowledged.

²¹ https://www.eib.org/attachments/strategies/eib_group_strategy_on_gender_equality_en.pdf

²² As set out in EWL's 2010 position paper on health: <https://womenlobby.org/Women-s-Health-in-the-EU-June-2010>

We have also heard about recent measures taken to allow for the **free movement of workers** during COVID-19²³ to ensure the ongoing provision of frontline workers across EU Member States, particularly in the health care and agriculture sectors. *This disproportionately applies to many women from Central Eastern Europe, the Balkan and the Baltic States, as well as from Southern Europe who travel to other EU countries to work in low-paid jobs, are less likely to receive the same social protections as those afforded to citizens of those countries, and face a heightened risk of infection.*²⁴

We stand in solidarity with all those women working at the forefront of this crisis and recognise the personal risks they take to serve our societies.

All responsible authorities must ensure **increased financial support for frontline and essential services are streamlined across the EU and are available to all, irrespective of their migration status, to ensure all have equal access to social protection measures.** *In Latvia, the government recently announced that the salary of frontline medics, pharmacists and health policy specialists fighting COVID-19 would be increased by at least 20%.*

Continued provision of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)

In a moment of crisis, it is so important to ensure we continue to recognise that SRHR are essential for the wellbeing and health of women and girls everywhere. Whether it is in relation to childbirth, contraceptives, abortion services or access to information, it remains crucial these services are still available through this period of crisis and beyond.

In Government responses to ensuring adequate provision of care for those affected by the virus, where ‘non-essential’ services and surgeries are being cancelled or postponed, we must ensure all pregnancy related care continues to be recognised as essential. *In the Czech Republic, Ireland and France, we have heard about the implications of hospitals implementing measures that prevent fathers or other close relatives from being present at childbirth, and thus placing incredible strains on new mothers who take on the role of sole caretaker.* The impact of COVID-19 on the birthing experience of every woman should be kept to an absolute minimum and there must be clear ongoing communication to pregnant women outlining all developments in service provision and COVID-19 advice for pregnant women.

For medical abortion services, we call for the **EU-wide introduction of teleconsultations for prescription of the abortion pill.** This must be delivered by all Member States as **abortion care must be considered urgent and medically necessary**, and recognising the need to reduce burden and risk for doctors’ surgeries and patients alike. Access to contraceptives in this time is particularly important, with many experts noting the possibility of a baby boom in late-2020: such support must again be recognised as essential, and **governments should fast-track ensuring free contraceptives are easily accessible for all.** Teleconsultation should be accessible for all, including women with disabilities. Information about methods of abortion and access to abortion under the specific COVID-19 situation

²³ See the European Commission’s Communication on *Guidelines concerning the exercise of the free movement of workers during COVID-19 outbreak* (2020/C 102 I/03), [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020XC0330\(03\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020XC0330(03))

²⁴ See examples in the UK <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/mar/28/fruit-and-veg-will-run-out-unless-britain-charters-planes-to-fly-in-farm-workers-from-eastern-europe> and in France <http://www.rfi.fr/en/france/20200325-coronavirus-covid19-food-agriculture-france>

must be accessible in comprehensive form to all women. *In Belgium, the government just made contraceptives free for all women under 25 years of age.*

These steps are crucial now, but we must also recognise the opportunity this moment presents to significantly advance our treatment of SRHR in all societies to ensure these supports are embedded in our healthcare systems, and women's mental, physical and sexual health is no longer side-lined.

Protecting the health of women and girls too often left in the margins of society

During this crisis, older people aged 65 years and over face the highest risk of impact by COVID-19. This is particularly concerning for older women who represent more than half the older population. Older women face challenges that are further aggravated while living in long-term, often under-resourced care facilities and are adjusting to self-isolation measures. Older women also face disruptions to routine health services, in obtaining medicine, or are already impacted by pre-existing health conditions. Furthermore, across the EU, 19.8 million older women live alone, making this the largest proportion of women living alone overall.²⁵ **Adequate support mechanisms must therefore be in place to ensure that older women are treated with dignity and respect without discrimination when receiving medical treatment. Regularised and safe access to household supplies, financial support, medicine and social support must be made available for older women, particularly those living alone.**

Women and girls with disabilities face compounding issues during this crisis, particularly those with pre-existing health conditions or are living in institutional settings. Access to ongoing and quality services, support and care face huge disruptions. **It is crucial that services offering information, emergency contact numbers and helplines are all accessible, including relay services for Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and Deafblind women and girls.** This moment also offers an opportunity to assess and ensure all health services, both existing and emergency measures, are based on principles of non-discrimination. Women with disabilities should receive **confirmation on what practices are in place should their personal assistants or carers become unwell**, ensuring there is no need for institutionalisation or that care duties fall to family or friends.

Women and girls in asylum seeking centres are being held in already overcrowded and not fit-for-purpose facilities. Now more than ever they must be provided with measures to ensure they are able to self-isolate and have access to facilities that permit them to wash their hands frequently. *In Ireland, plans are being developed for a self-isolation facility for asylum seeking persons, deportations have been postponed, and assurances have been given by the government that health care and income support will be available to all undocumented migrants and that they are encouraged to seek help if needed.*

Roma and Traveller women and girls have too often been left at risk to their health for many years due to substandard sanitation facilities, lack of access to national healthcare systems, stigmatisation and discrimination leading to poor service or discriminatory practices (such as forced sterilisation). **Across Europe, FRA has found that 30% of Roma persons live in households with no running water.**²⁶ In these days as we face the pandemic, we must ensure that **all women and girls across Europe have quality standards of living** so that everyone can live safely during isolation periods, and **long term**

²⁵ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/519219/IPOL_STU%282015%29519219_EN.pdf

²⁶ [Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey: Roma](#)

investment must be made so that these additional health risks faced by Roma and Traveller communities come to an end.

It is imperative that EU Member States ensure that **immediate and accurate public health communication** is accessible to all during this crisis. This includes ensuring information is available in **plain, simple and easy to read language**, in **simple formats**, as well as in **languages for all or with appropriate interpreters for Deaf, Hard of Hearing and Deafblind women and girls and linguistically diverse groups**, and can also reach those living in **segregated institutions**.

It is also essential to recognise that self-isolation and social distancing can have a negative impact on deaf and blind women, or women who have previously experienced abuse, triggering flashbacks and increasing anxiety. We also recognise the impact of secondary trauma being experienced by those supporting frontline workers, victims of violence etc. Hence, **it is crucial to ensure continued access to free psycho-social health support and that there is increased capacity for those who need it**. To protect women from isolation and anxiety, Member States must **invest in programmes promoting digital skills/competences of women aged 55 and over**, and for women who finished their formal education 30+ years ago, and others who may not have experience with digital technology who require this for their access to social and practical needs.

Those affected by prostitution are too often unable to avail of health supports, whether due to stigma, the overrepresentation of migrant women who may not have legal access to free healthcare, or a lack of specialised services. In this moment in particular, if financial, housing and crucially health supports are not provided to all women and girls exploited in the sex trade, they will be forced to take further risks to their health and wellbeing in even more isolated or controlled circumstances to support their families. Hence, **we call on all governments to ensure this access is made alongside investment in the provision of information and outreach to ensure these supports reach the women whose health is particularly at risk due to a lack of usual social support and poverty**.

5. EWL's recommendations for solidary, care and transformation

It is only through working together that we can realise the urgently needed responses being sought by so many millions of women and girls across the European region, while ensuring that this moment is one of transformative change, turning the lessons from this global moment of crisis into an opportunity for greater equality and empowerment for all. The response plan and framework for redesign and renewal after this unprecedented crisis must be constructed in a spirit of solidarity and mutual support throughout the EU, ensuring that all women and girls rights are respected regardless of where they live.

Recommendations to EU Member States:

Immediate actions required:

- **Women should be equally represented in decision-making processes and sustainably funded women's civil society organisations must be consulted** with when developing and implementing local, regional, national responses and European responses and plans for redesign and renewal.
- Emergency responses must be grounded in women's rights and incorporate a **gender perspective in the design and implementation of services which draws on accurate and streamlined sex-disaggregated data**, ensuring there is a **clear end-date to any restriction to human rights during this crisis period**.
- All risks of women and girls to **male violence** must be acknowledged and **protection services and mechanisms** must be in place, fully funded and running to **support all women victims**:
 - **Shelters, health and financial services for homeless women, asylum seeking women, victims of male violence and those affected by prostitution must remain open** with the appropriate measures taken to protect women and workers from the spread of the virus. Where needed, agencies should receive **funding to support developing decentralised helplines** to ensure services are accessible for all persons and not disrupted due to isolation measures.
 - **Awareness raising campaigns** should be developed and targeted to victims of different forms of violence. **Campaigns should also target potential abusers**, highlighting that prosecutions for male violence will continue to be made.
 - Law enforcement units should be especially attentive to the **early identification of victims** and protection measures (such as emergency barring orders, rest and recovery periods and restraining and protection orders) must continue to be enforced.
- Provide **gender-responsive social and economic measures to support women and girls in precarious situations**, including those at risk of losing their jobs, at risk of living in poverty, and/or are experiencing in-work poverty. This must be done through **adequate financial support that extends to women working precarious jobs irrespective of their legal status**, including **lump sum payments for qualifying individuals including women with disabilities, tax relief measures, subsidising of goods and services and allowing caregivers and working parents the right to a special leave that guarantees 100% of their income**.
- Recognise **abortion care** as urgent and medically necessary, introduce **EU-wide teleconsultations for prescription of the abortion pill** and **fast-track free and easily accessible contraceptives for all**.

- Make sure that **immediate and accurate public health communication** is available in **plain, simple and easy to read language**, in **formats and languages to be accessible to all**, and that can also reach those living in **segregated institutions** and **women affected by prostitution**.
- Provide **continued access and increased capacity to free psycho-social health supports**.
- **Assess and ensure all health services**, both existing and emergency measures, **are regularised, provided through safe access and are based on principles of non-discrimination**.

For longer term prevention and feminist social transformation:

- Ensure **gender mainstreaming** is at the centre of the development of all policies, incorporating lessons learned about the diversity of needs of women so that no woman or girl is left behind.
- Introduce **temporary special measures** to protect women from facing the brunt of the implications of economic recession and austerity (on top of pre-existing measures), and ensure that in future times of economic recession such measures are never again considered, recognising the harm they do to the stability and sustainability of positive social structures.
- **Ensure the next Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027 allows for increased investment in the care economy and the funding of a Care Deal for Europe**, making sure that women's perspectives are streamlined across all areas **through gender budgeting**, and that **adequate resourcing** is provided to women's organisations.
- Ratify and implement the **Council of Europe Convention on combating and preventing violence against women and domestic violence**, and its provisions concerning prevention, protection and prosecution should be granted and reinforced during this crisis in view of the higher risk of victimisation for women and girls. Adopt the **Equality Model** on prostitution urgently.

Recommendations to the European Commission:

Immediate actions required:

- Adopt and implement the **Gender Equality Strategy** as a matter of utmost urgency, with a clear implementation timeline, robust engagement across all parts of the Commission, strongly coordinated and monitored through the Task Force for Equality in collaboration with the DG JUST Gender Equality Unit.
- **Call on Member States to loosen the criteria of the European Stability Pact, redirect Cohesion Funds, apply gender mainstreaming in all spending priorities and declare as essential services all the support services to women.**
- Ensure that responses to the pandemic, whether through the issuing of 'corona/Euro bonds' or **allocation of Cohesion funds** within the current MFF (2014-2020), are in-line with the eventual development of a care economy.
- **Ensure all Commission-funded civil society organisation projects are amended to provide security for those organisations.** This should include **flexibility in project timeline**; ensure that **salaries paid** under these projects are payable throughout the 'lockdown' periods in addition to project delivery phase (creating an additional funding pot as required); and allow for additional **negotiation on capacity for co-funding requirements** where needed.
- Establish relevant **coordination mechanisms at the local, national and regional level** with all relevant actors, including women's rights organisations, to ensure the streamlined protection of women and girls.

- Allocate funding and support to hold **national dialogues** and **coordinate the exchange of good practices transnationally, to include women's organisations.**

For longer term prevention and feminist social transformation:

- Ensure that the next **Multiannual Financial Framework** (2021-2027) provides for **implementation of gender mainstreaming, a financial guarantee for women's organisations,** and to deliver on a Care Deal for Europe.
- Adopt a **Care Deal for Europe** where women and men are equal earners-equal carers, have equal, flexible options to balance their work and care responsibilities across the life-cycle, and invest in a **care economy.** This should include particular efforts to **improve the systems of care for the elderly, mainly women,** with a financing system that reduces the enormous weight of spending and efforts on their families, most of them women.
- Call on the **European Investment Bank** to ensure its annual budget is directed to the development of the **care economy** as part of its implementation of its own Strategy on Gender Equality and Women's Economic Empowerment.
- Ensure **gender mainstreaming** is at the centre of the development of all policies, particularly in the context of the climate, digitalisation and migration, incorporating lessons learned about the diversity of needs of women and how these policies impact us.
- Continue working for the EU accession to the Istanbul Convention, and urgently propose a **Directive on preventing and combating all forms of violence against women and girls** to align with existing relevant EU legislation and strengthen measures to disrupt the full continuum of violence, aligned with the Istanbul Convention and including sexual exploitation, tackling both online and offline violence.



EUROPEAN WOMEN'S
LOBBY
EUROPEEN DES FEMMES

ABOUT THE EUROPEAN WOMEN'S LOBBY

Founded in 1990, the European Women's Lobby (EWL) is the largest alliance of over 2,000 women's non-governmental associations in the EU coming together to campaign for their common vision of a Feminist Europe.

CREDITS

We thank all of **EWL's Board Members** and staff who participated in the preparation, drafting and review of this brief. This incredible collaboration in times of immense uncertainty is a true testament to our feminist values, in which compassion, empathy, care, solidarity and social justice are at the heart of our work.

The European Women's Lobby (EWL) would like to dedicate a special thank you to the knowledgeable women from across Europe who are working under increasingly challenging times of COVID-19, and yet have been instrumental in reporting on the situations affecting women and girls across Europe during this pandemic.

President: Gwendoline Lefebvre

Secretary-General: Joanna Maycock

Editorial and publication coordination: Adéolá Adérèmi, Catriona Graham, Joanna Maycock, Jessica Nguyen, Stephanie Yates

Contributors: Asha Allen, Mary Collins, Manon Deshayes, Claire Fourçans, Catriona Graham, Jessica Nguyen, Irene Rosales and members of the [Board of the European Women's Lobby](#)

Editing: Adéolá Adérèmi

Design: Catriona Graham



This publication has been funded by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme of the European Union.

The information contained in the publication does not necessarily reflect the position of the European Commission.