

## The ESC Madrid Declaration: promoting evidence-based SRHR policies with respect for human rights

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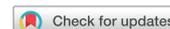
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## EDITORIAL

# The ESC Madrid Declaration: promoting evidence-based SRHR policies with respect for human rights

## Introduction

Despite many advancements in the past decades, we are currently being confronted with a threat of regression of SRHR. In several European countries, SRHR-related policies and laws have been made more restrictive. The situation in Poland is particularly worrying, as abortion is severely restricted in the country and the emergency contraception pill is no longer freely available. These restrictive policy-changes are influenced by ultra-conservative forces that are actively working against progress in SRHR and advancements in gender equality [1]. They oppose access to contraception and safe and legal abortion, deny the need for comprehensive sexuality and reproductive health education (CSRE) and want to roll-back the rights of LGBTI-people. They want to promote the so-called 'traditional' family and do not want to protect the rights of minorities that do not fit in this picture.

The ultra-conservative forces Europe have been extremely well-organised in their campaigns to roll back human rights for SRH. The *European Parliamentary Forum* for sexual and reproductive rights (EPF) launched a report which provides insight into the clandestine workings and deliberate strategy of the anti-choice advocacy network 'Agenda Europe', which is driven by religious dogma [2]. Agenda Europe was established in 2013 and holds annual summits attended by over 100 anti-SRHR activists from all over Europe. Being aware and understanding this ultra-conservative movement is essential for those who want to safeguard a modern, inclusive and tolerant Europe.

The European Society of Contraception and Reproductive Health (ESC) has been increasingly worried about the appearance of these anti-gender views and publicity, and is concerned that this might undermine the organisation's aim to improve and facilitate knowledge on SRHR. Therefore, the ESC decided to draft a Position Paper on SRHR that was launched in September 2019 in Madrid at the World Contraception Day event organised by the Spanish Society of Contraception. The decision to develop this paper was also triggered by the inspirational and comprehensive report from the Guttmacher-Lancet Commission that was launched in 2018 and proposed a new, comprehensive definition of SRHR, an associated essential package of health services, and outlines several actions needed within and beyond the health sector to uphold human rights [3]. The Madrid Declaration is based on this report but focuses in particular on the European perspective and is therefore relevant for all 53 states within the WHO Europe region. The paper is an important contribution to ongoing discussions in European governments and civil society on a wide range of SRHR-related issues. It highlights in particular the importance of evidence-based decision-making and respect for human rights when planning and implementing SRHR policies.

## Evidence-based medicine and policy-making

The Madrid Paper stresses the need for policies to be based on factual evidence instead of political and religious viewpoints, when planning and implementing SRH policies. To counter myths on SRHR, the ESC itself has a responsibility to communicate evidence-based information.

Over the past decades, there has been developed a considerable body of evidence on SRHR. There is strong evidence that contraception saves lives, improves health and is highly cost-effective. Consequently, the ESC believes that a wide range of contraceptives must be freely available to women and men in Europe. There is also strong evidence that the accessibility and availability of safe abortion services leads to significantly lower abortion-related morbidity and mortality rates. Consequently, abortion must be accessible in a safe environment for those women who request it. Despite this evidence, legislation on abortion continues to be very restricted in several countries. In particular, several countries permit refusals of care on grounds of conscience while no regulation and oversight is in place to make sure that women have access to an adequate number of healthcare professionals who do provide the services. Abortion legislation tends to lag behind societal attitudes and needs. The referendum on the abortion ban in Ireland in April 2018, which paved the way for the Irish parliament to introduce a more liberal regime on abortion, should nevertheless be mentioned as a positive example that shows that change is possible.

Within the Madrid Paper, the ESC refers to the above-mentioned and other evidence. The varied and rich evidence cited document therefore can play an important role in designing and implementing SRH policies. In addition, the ESC is also committed to supporting continuous research on SRHR.

In line with the need for evidence-based ESR policies, there is also a need for CSRE that is accurate and scientifically sound. Regrettably, there is still a lot of ideological opposition to CSRE in Europe, using the false argument that it encourages sex at younger ages. Research has proven that this is not true, as countries with long-standing comprehensive CSRE programs such as the Netherlands, Switzerland and Finland have the lowest proportion of those with a sexual debut by the age of 15 years [4]. The ESC thus supports evidence-based, proven methodologies for delivering CSRE and refers in particular to the WHO standards [5] and the IPPF guidelines [6,7].

## Human rights

Next to the primacy of scientific evidence, the ESC also prioritises the importance of respect for human rights when making SRH policies. While all human rights are relevant to

SRHR, the Council of Europe identified in particular the key importance of the right to health, to life, to freedom from torture and other ill-treatment, to privacy and to equality and non-discrimination [8]. The ESC therefore emphasises that *all* people are entitled to full respect and protection of their SRHR.

In this light, the ESC is concerned about discrimination and lack of access to SRHR services of several groups. For example, the position paper refers to instances of forced and coercive sterilisation of Roma women and the involuntary removal of gonads of people undergoing gender reassignment or intersex people. ESC also signals discrimination in access to infertility in some countries, with single women or women in same-sex partnerships being excluded from accessing *in vitro* fertilisation or donor-insemination services. Another major topic of concern are the human rights of undocumented migrants, who are often not entitled to non-emergency healthcare. These denials and infringements of people's human rights must be ended.

The Madrid Declaration also refers to the oppressive effect of criminal law in many countries. Criminalisation of adultery, same-sex relations, drug use, abortion, sex work and HIV transmission, exposure and non-disclosure can have a severely negative impact on health and human rights [9]. For example, in case of criminalisation of sex workers, sex workers are driven underground and therefore less likely to seek the health care they need. Similarly, criminalising abortion has also been shown not to reduce the incidence of abortion, but rather increase the incidences of abortion in unsafe, clandestine settings.

## Conclusions

The ESC recognises the threat of ultraconservative forces working against progress in SRHR. The Madrid Declaration is therefore a timely initiative to counter the misinformation of this growing movement. The declaration stresses the importance of evidence-based medicine and respect for human rights when planning and implementing SRHR policies. It provides a clear definition of SRHR, an overview of SRH services and discusses several specific areas of consideration. It concerns a varied and rich evidence cited document that can be of use for policy-makers, politicians, service providers and SRHR advocates. Therefore, I hope that it will be widely disseminated and used.

The full ESC Position Paper can be downloaded from: <https://escrh.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/ESC-Position-Paper.pdf>

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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