



Access to sexual and reproductive health services during the COVID-19 pandemic

Media reports as well as reports from NGOs show that some health care facilities in Slovakia restricted women's right to a birth companion of her choice during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, some health care facilities deny women access to pain relief (epidural analgesia), or perform caesarean section, or separate women from their newborns without proper medical indication. Some doctors are using the COVID-19 pandemic to suspend abortion care.

The Public Defender of Rights is concerned that these practices are not in line with international human rights standards and World Health Organization's guidelines.

In relation to the limitation on the exercise of the women's right to a birth companion, the Public Defender of Rights stresses that in line with World Health Organization's guidelines, pregnant women, including those with confirmed or suspected COVID-19 infections, have the right to high quality care before, during and after childbirth. A safe and positive childbirth experience includes having a companion of choice present during delivery. In addition, World Health Organization called on health workers to take all appropriate precautions to reduce risks of infection by using protective equipment and respecting hygiene principles. The UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women recommended for states to guarantee women's right to a birth companion of her choice.

According to the World Health Organization, companion of choice during labour and childbirth has a proven impact on the positive course of labor. It increases likelihood of vaginal birth, thereby reducing unnecessary caesarean section and represents psychological and emotional support for women. Its presence may thus reduce the likelihood that medical interventions in labor will be necessary, requiring the intervention of medical staff.

In relation to the reported denial of access to pain relief, the Public Defender of Rights stresses that the UN the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment concluded that the de facto denial of access to pain relief, if it causes severe pain and suffering, constitutes cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

The Public Defender of Rights is concerned that restrictions on access to safe abortion might cause an increase in unsafe abortion rates. At the same time, the Public Defender of Rights stresses that restrictions on the provision of health services are disproportionately affecting women living in poverty, women with disabilities, victims of rape and domestic violence.

Any limitation on the exercise of the rights and freedoms, even in times of epidemic and emergency, can only be undertaken if such intervention pursues a legitimate aim, is necessary and must be proportionate in the way it is implemented.



The Public Defender of Rights considers essential that healthcare institutions apply uniform standards and procedures based on the latest scientific evidence while promoting and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms of all individuals.

The Public Defender of Rights therefore recommends that the Minister of Health of the Slovak Republic adopts appropriate measures to ensure that all women and girls have access to a full range of sexual and reproductive health services during the COVID-19 pandemic.