

COMMENTS AND LETTERS



The COVID-19 pandemic presents unprecedented health, economic and social challenges for Europe. PHOTO: MATTHEW MIRABELLI

Equality during COVID-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic has affected countries all over the world and impacted the lives and well-being of many people.

However, as the situation develops, it is crucial that the core values of equality and non-discrimination continue to be protected and promoted for all. Since coronavirus struck, the pandemic has shattered the way of life of most people. It has changed the way people greet each other; it has changed the travel industry, public gatherings, doing politics, and the economy among other sectors.

As a result of such change, the pandemic has highlighted serious existing deficiencies in our society. As the European Commissioner for Equality Helena Dalli declared, the coronavirus pandemic "brought to the forefront inequalities in our society that existed before, but which are heightened in this crisis".

The growing wave of racism and xenophobia, the disregard of the human rights of migrants and refugees, and the threats to women's rights are the main challenges that European countries are facing in the field of human rights. In effect, 68 per cent of equality bodies in Europe have received complaints and/or requests for information pertaining to discrimination resulting from COVID-19, and on preventive measures.

The current COVID-19 pandemic has fanned the flames of racism and xenophobia. The most common issues that national equality bodies across Europe have reported concern discrimination against specific groups, namely people perceived as Asian or Italian. In such cases, discrimination includes the denial of goods and services, refusal of access to accommodation and instances of hate speech, both online and in person. Hence, the need to ensure that such occurrences are investigated and prosecuted accordingly.

Violence against women is an ever-present scourge in our societies that has exacerbated with the coronavirus pandemic. As more people stay at home, the risk of intimate-partner violence is likely to increase. France and Lithuania have reported an increase of such cases, registering 32 per cent and 20 per cent increases respectively. This spark stems from the increased exposure of women to their perpetrators, as well as lack of social and institutional support.

In addition, loss of income or unemployment can further discourage victims from leaving their abusive perpetrator. In this regard, various measures have been taken in different countries includ-

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ing awareness raising campaigns. The government of Malta has included the strengthening of the existing service for free legal assistance to domestic violence victims by specially-trained lawyers.

The workplace is another space that remains a key challenge to achieving equality at work, especially during this pandemic. Misconceptions about the virus resulted in verbal insults, harassment, physical aggression and online hate speech, as well as adverse actions in some workplaces. During this unprecedented time, employers and employees should be aware that existing employment laws still apply protecting employees from discrimination in the workplace.

Companies and businesses around the world must ensure that all workers, irrespective of their gender, family responsibilities, age, race or ethnic origin, religion or belief, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics, are treated equally and with due respect and dignity.

In addition, another widespread challenge is gender inequality. Progress is slow in bridging the gender pay gap, addressing discrimination at work and tackling women's under-representation in political decision-making. Women are also still confronted with various obstacles such as online sexual harassment and sexist hate speech. This pandemic is not conducive to bring about effective change.

On a positive note, the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that teleworking can be an effective and flexible working arrangement. During the past years, NCPE has been promoting family-

friendly measures such as telework to facilitate the reconciliation of work and family life.

Yet, before the coronavirus outbreak, teleworking was not common in the EU, with only 5.4 per cent of employed persons aged 15-64 regularly working from home in 2019. Nowadays, many companies have shifted to teleworking in order to strike a balance between ensuring work continuity, while safeguarding the health of their employees.

The COVID-19 pandemic presents unprecedented health, economic and social challenges for Europe, and has profound implications for the way people live and work across the world. In view of this, equality must be strengthened and individuals must show solidarity with one another. As António Guterres, secretary general of the United Nations said, "we must fight the virus for all of humanity, with a focus on people, especially the most affected: women, older persons, youth, low-wage workers, small and medium enterprises, the informal sector and vulnerable groups".

In this context, the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) is committed to tackle the increasing challenges to equality and human rights. NCPE has continued working on various initiatives, including communications and awareness-raising, and is monitoring the situation vis-à-vis equality. NCPE is offering its services to the public and other stakeholders, and can be contacted, as per usual, for the lodging of complaints of alleged discrimination as well as for seeking information or assistance on matters related to equality and equality mainstreaming.