World Contraception Day: access to contraception remains a big challenge in Europe

Access to contraception should be a key concern of European governments in empowering their citizens to plan their families and lives, argues Petra De Sutter.

“French fries, beer and chocolate”, is the usual response of my international colleagues when I ask them what Belgium is known for.

What is less well known, however, is that Belgium is a European champion when it comes to access to contraception. Together with France and the UK, Belgium has topped the 2019 Contraception Atlas, a list of 46 European countries, for three consecutive years.
The Contraception Atlas, an initiative of the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual & Reproductive Rights (EPF), analyses the contraception policies of European countries through a panel of experts and academics, of which I am a member.

In Belgium, both abortion and teenage pregnancy rates are among the lowest in Europe. Those figures are the result of strong policy measures, including the reimbursement of contraception costs for young people, and accessible, high-quality (online) information.

Other countries also scored relatively well in the Contraception Atlas, with 17 countries improving on their 2018 scores. Noteworthy improvements include policy changes in Finland and Andorra to enable easier access to contraception by providing reimbursement to young people as well as emergency contraception without prescription.

The picture, however, is not all rosy. The overall results serve as a stark reminder that much more needs to be done to improve access to contraception across Europe.

No less than 43 percent of pregnancies in Europe are unplanned. Barely 69 percent of fertile women in a serious relationship are making use of modern methods of contraception. With these figures, Europe is faring worse than several North and Latin American countries.

Many countries across Europe fail to provide any reimbursement costs for contraception and online information is often lacking. Hungary and Poland are the worst performing countries. In Poland, emergency contraception is no longer available without prescription, catapulting it to the bottom of the rankings by far.

Contraception allows people to make choices about their sexuality, reproduction and future. Imagine what your life would have looked like if you had had no access to contraceptives. Most sexually active young people do not (yet) aspire to start a family.

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The intrauterine device (IUD), an effective contraceptive with a long-term effect, could be a suitable
means for them to avoid or delay pregnancy.

Unfortunately, the IUD is simply too expensive in many European countries. In Italy, certain IUDs cost more than €200, which is beyond the reach of most teenagers. Experience has confirmed in Belgium prove that the cost factor is indeed a barrier for many European youngsters.

After introducing greater subsidies for contraceptives, the use of the IUDs by young people increased by 40 percent.

“Democracy, freedom and human rights”, foreign colleagues answer when I ask what Europe stands for. This does not apply to birth control. How “democratic” is a European country if it ignores the sexual and reproductive rights of its people?

How “free” are you as a woman when there is a constant risk of unwanted pregnancy hanging over you?

Access to contraception should be a key concern of European governments in empowering their citizens to plan their families and lives.

About the author

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