

Reproductive rights and the European Union: a qualitative study of opposition and the impacts on health

Lynda Gilby MSc, Meri Koivusalo MD PhD

Background: Sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services are an essential part of Universal Health Coverage (UHC). UHC is upheld in the UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3.8. on Good Health and Well-being, and SRH is articulated in the SDG goal 5 on Gender Equality. However, despite global commitments and international agreements, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) remain contested and often treated as a political preference rather than an issue of access to health services. While the literature on gender and politics often focuses on representation, our understanding of how this impacts health and access to health services remains limited. This article explores the opposition to SRHR at the European level as part of a broader opposition to democracy and democratic institutions. It focuses on the decision-making institutions of the European Union (EU), as they set the agenda of the EU and provide policy direction. This article is based around the central research questions of 1) how SRHR opposition actors are targeting the EU institutions and 2) what challenges this poses for health policymaking at the EU level. **Methods:** This study includes data which was collected from multiple sources. Data included: 1) European Parliamentary debates on the 2019, 2021 and 2022 reports on SRHR, 2) Council of European Union conclusions, 3) Global and regional organisation reports, 4) Elite key informant interviews. **Results:** The results uncover a toolbox of strategies used to undermine policymaking on a topic that impacts health at the European level. This demonstrates a globally coordinated effort to restrict access to SRH services by targeting international forums. Furthermore, opposition to SRHR is also used as a political tool that is part of a broader anti-democratic movement that is also composed of nationalism, climate change denial, and opposition to public health regulations and mandates. **Conclusion:** Opposition to SRHR is part of a broader, global movement, grounded in de-democratisation, which impacts health and access to health services. This article has shown that this is not only an important topic worthy of scholarly analysis in fields of gender studies and political sciences but requires attention from health and medical sciences.