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**OCTOBER**  
**CLOSURE**  
**OF THE 5TH INTERNATIONAL**  
**ACTION** OF THE WORLD  
MARCH OF WOMEN

**REGIONAL DOCUMENT**  
**EUROPE**

**2020**

## European Region Analysis

The European situation before the pandemic was very similar amongst the different countries, despite translating in different ways locally. The 2008 financial crisis, deepened by the austeritarian and neoliberal agendas of the European Union, created a climate where the privatization of public services, the increasing precariousness of labour conditions, the exclusion and criminalization of migrants and the dismantling of the welfare state led to an increase on the levels of poverty, unemployment, and inequality. This regression was accompanied by a rise in conservatism that not only marginalized all the people that cannot be part of the dominant system, but also legitimized the women's overload of paid and unpaid work, and the setback in areas as gender based violence, reproductive rights and sexual liberties.

Within this context, women experienced the deepening and worsening of the social and economic violence targeting them. They are the ones mainly sustaining the impact of labour exploitation and lack of social protection, the dismantling of the welfare state and public services, and the power of the multinationals companies along with the increase of the level of violence inside and outside their homes, the femicides and the rise of sexism. For example, there has been a delay, and in some countries even a refusal, to rectify and apply the Istanbul convention that has been, since its creation, a guide for countries to fight gender based violence.

There is also a process of gentrification and touristification of European cities, impacting mainly women and their rights to the cities, as the tourism industry relies heavily on precarious jobs and on the heavy monopolization of prices regarding basic needs such as food, transports and housing. This lack of access to affordable housing and common goods perpetuates women's economic dependency towards their families and prevents women experiencing violence from escaping, whilst throws into deeper poverty women responsible for looking after dependent family members, mainly children and the elderly, with no family backup. It also further impacts on migrant women or women in a vulnerable situation, such as the ones in prostitution, that are already living in deep poverty. Alongside, we also witnessed an increase in repression tools, such as the prison system, to incarcerate not only women living in poverty and marginalized women but also women activists, seen as transgressors.

This neoliberal context also brought a revival of the extractivism industry in some European countries, destroying entire historic cities and natural sites, whilst sharpening the climate justice crisis humanity faces. For example, the Balkan region is experiencing a huge threat of small hydro power plants that are planned to be built on almost every river in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The dismantling of public services was followed by a servicing of the economy contributing for the destruction of essential sectors as the fisheries or agriculture, also essential for food sovereignty, that gave the monopoly of food distribution to big corporations.

This was the context that allowed the rise of the far right across Europe, and provided the grounds for an increase in the militarization for our lives, the repression of progressive social movements and marginalized communities, a revival of colonialism and white supremacy sentiment, as well as the crystallization of gender roles and patriarchal values.



The pandemic translated in a worsening of this context and impacted further on women's lives. The women were overburden with care work, particularly of the elderly, children and disabled people. The sexual division of work was accentuated as women are the main work force in care and cleaning jobs, such as hospitals, care homes, nurseries, schools and private houses. Women's bodies-territories have once more become the ground for fundamentalist, conservative political authorities and religious leaders who have declared women's reproductive autonomy "non-essential" as they close down abortion services and drastically reduce women's access to pre-natal care and other sexual and reproductive care.

With the imposition of a lockdown in the majority of European countries, several economic sectors stopped labouring. Here we can find differences amongst the countries. In some countries, there was an imposition of "working from home" policies where women were demanded to conciliate their paid work with the care of dependent family members as schools, nurseries and elderly day-centres were closed. The pandemic affected public education severely and, particularly, the education of girls from vulnerable groups. In other countries we witnessed a destruction of women's jobs, particularly the ones working in precarious conditions, in part-time or the ones that are fragile small business owners. The street markets, where many women base their income, were closed however big supermarket chains remained open, increasing their profits during the pandemic.

During the lockdown the movement of citizens was restricted and except the essential workers nobody else was allowed to work. However there have been documented cases of construction works going on the rivers and no adequate penalties have been imposed to those who broke the governments and environmental law in the Balkans region. There are also reports that industries and factories kept labouring despite not producing essential products, increasing the risk of contamination, particularly in public transports. Furthermore, people living in high-pollution cities are more likely to have compromised respiratory, cardiac and other systems – and are therefore more vulnerable to COVID-19's impacts.

The response to the pandemic was based mainly in punitive and repressive measures such as the suppression of democracy and the interdiction of protests, circulation restrictions, the use of the military for the surveillance of its citizens and the spread of social panic to cover the growing privatization and divestment in public health systems.

It was notorious the increase on the number of cases of gender based violence, as women were in lockdown with their abusers, were we witnessed an escalation in the severity and frequency of attacks, without a proper response from state, burdening women's organizations on the ground trying to support these women, with some exceptions.

Migrant women were particularly vulnerable, with the demand to keep self-isolation in precarious living conditions, lack of economic resources or access to health care. In detention centres and sheltered centres for migrants preventive measures and sanitary conditions were not guaranteed, leaving migrants exposed to infection whilst having no access to proper healthcare or social services. The pandemic was also used to further repress migrants using the hygiene and sanitary logic to legitimize detention and border control. The situation was particularly severe in the refugee camps, already lacking sanitary conditions pre-pandemic, and with many NGOs leaving the camps with the imposition of a lockdown, endangering not only access to basic healthcare but also to basic needs such as food and water. This also left refugee women extremely vulnerable to violence.



The situation of women in prison, already vulnerable, was also worsened, leaving many without access to their families, legal representation, proper healthcare and therefore with less means to survive.

The manipulation of the media created scapegoats: in a first phase, the elderly, seen as a burden for the state, particularly for public health systems; and after the lockdown, the migrant and racialized communities, instrumentalized to cover the true reasons behind the public health crisis. The social movements and its activists were also targeted, accused of spreading the virus, if there was an attempt to organize protest actions. The weakening of democracy and loss of civil liberties is notorious. In other countries, the media was used as a scapegoat to justify the imprisonment of the journalists and opposition leaders.

Whilst the increasing of policing was widely accepted, governments also controlled the amount of information that was disclosed publicly, covering the death rates in some countries and generating panic regarding the state of the economy. Efforts were made to push for a vaccine, mobilizing mainly huge private finance, that will in turn transform a vaccine in a pharmaceutical business profiting big corporations, and only accessible to the wealthy.

This context was used by conservative forces, particularly the far right and the neo fascists, to instigate racist and xenophobic sentiments and to increase the spread of fake news, in some cases denying the existence of a pandemic or blaming the migrants and stigmatized communities for it.

Even in a situation of a pandemic, there has been resistance from social movements, as the black lives movements, ecologist and feminist groups organizing strikes, as well as popular solidarity initiatives to support the most vulnerable during the pandemic; however we also witnessed a fragmentation of progressive forces that had to adapt to exercise their activism in different ways due to the pandemic, but remarkably, this offensive of patriarchal capital has failed to crush and silence the critical voices- since May 68, Europe had not seen mobilizations and strikes of such importance, mobilizing feminists and environmentalists for the protection of the climate justice and for the defense of women's and LGBTQI + people rights.

Alongside, action to keep vital food supplies moving across borders must be accompanied by strict measures to curb financial speculation linked to food commodities, or we face a replay of the 'food price crisis' which accompanied the financial meltdown in 2008. We need to ensure that local food producers are getting the support they need to sell their products on the market and that farmers are encouraged to save and exchange seeds. For years this work has mostly been linked to women's heritage and the crisis has shown us just how important this aspect is.

The current situation is forcing social movements to think more strategically for the future. It is important to build and reinforce alliances between progressive movements to create a common agenda that can provide responses to the social crisis we are experiencing. Here is important to bring to the table the 20 years of political work that the World March of Women has built as well as the more recent analysis prepared for our V International action, focusing on migration and multinationals. The articulation of struggles against patriarchy, capitalism, racism, colonialism, homo/lesbophobia, imperialism and fascism has always been part of the World March philosophy allied to the struggle for a feminist economy and climate justice. It is necessary that we continue to establish alliances regionally and locally with other movements and organizations that have similar agendas to strengthen our movement and allow our



alternatives to assert themselves not only as just and legitimate, in theory, but concretely, on the ground, in the practice and our daily lives.

