

**United Nations Human Rights Council, 47th Session (21 June to 29 July 2021)
Item 3: Interactive Dialogue with the Working Group on discrimination against
women**

Speaker: Humanists UK Representative, Rachel Taggart-Ryan¹

This intervention is made jointly by Humanists UK and BPAS. We welcome the Working Group's most recent report, in particular the recommendation to '[e]xpand the availability of sexual and reproductive health services, including through telemedicine and mobile clinics, to reach diverse populations'.²

We are alarmed that states have so easily dismissed the rights of women and girls during the Covid-19 pandemic. Most notably the widespread failure to recognise the well-established rights to reproductive and sexual health, including access to abortion services.³

In Romania, hospitals were instructed to suspend 'non-emergency surgery'. At the height of the crisis only 11 of Romania's 280 hospitals provided abortions, forcing women to risk unsafe means.⁴ Similar restrictions were reported in Croatia, Italy, and Slovakia.⁵ In countries with little to no legal access to abortion, such as Malta and Poland, travel restrictions and postal delays have further prevented women from accessing their only safe means to abortion.⁶

We welcome the Governments of the UK, Scotland and Wales' steps to enable access to telemedical abortion services as a temporary measure during the pandemic. This practice has proven to be accessible, safe, and effective, enabling women to make the right choice for them regardless of their circumstances.⁷ We support the recommendation of BPAS that these measures be made permanent. We hope the UK Government will continue to promote telemedicine as best practice, both in terms of medicine and human rights, setting an example for the international community.

We would like the Working Group to establish how it intends to address the regressive measures taken by some states in the enjoyment of the rights of women and girls brought about by the pandemic.

¹ Humanists UK is the operating name of the British Humanist Association.

² Human Rights Council, Forty-seventh session, *Women's and girls' sexual and reproductive health rights in crisis Report of the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls*, June 2021. <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/47/38>

³ *Ibid*

⁴ Jean Mackenzie, 'Coronavirus: Women denied abortions because of the pandemic,' *BBC News*, 24 June 2020. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/stories-53158162>

⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ BPAS, 'Pills By Post: English Government's public consultation on continue home use of both pills for early medical abortion response guide' December 2020. <https://www.bpas.org/media/3417/england-emaconsultation-template-response-december-20.pdf>