



CEE Bulletin on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

No 3 (173) 2018

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BURNING ISSUE

The 62nd Session of Commission on the Status of Women delivers a blueprint to ensure the rights and development of rural women and girls

The largest UN gathering focused on achieving gender equality and women's human rights concluded on March 23rd with strong and concrete commitments that address the realities of women and girls in rural areas.

The outcome of the two-week meeting, known as the [Agreed Conclusions](#) adopted by Member States, puts forth concrete measures to lift rural women and girls out of poverty and to ensure their rights, well-being and resilience.

The Commission [recognized](#) that women and girls in rural areas often face disparate reproductive health outcomes due to a lack of agency over their own lives and a lack of access to health care services. It noted that these disparities are exacerbated by multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. Governments committed to address these barriers by addressing health care worker

shortages, ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health services, information and education, and protecting women's reproductive rights and right to control their sexuality.

The Agreed Conclusions also include ensuring rural women's adequate living standards with equal access to land and productive assets, ending poverty, enhancing their food security and nutrition, decent work, infrastructure and technology, education and health, and ending all forms of violence and harmful practices. Member States recognize in the conclusions rural women's important role in addressing hunger and food insecurity. This strong outcome provides a roadmap on next steps that governments, civil society and women's groups can undertake to support the realization of rural women's rights and address their needs

The 62nd Session of Commission on the Status of Women (CSW 62) will be held from 12 to 23 March 2018 at the UN headquarters in New York. This year's priority theme is "Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls" and the review theme is "Participation in and access of women to the media, and information and communications technologies and their impact on and use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women".

[Official website of CSW](#)

[Read the statement of the Federation for Women and Family Planning on behalf of ASTRA Network](#)

[IWHC Press Release](#)

[UN Women Press Release](#)

REGIONAL UPDATES

Dunja Mijatović takes up office as Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

Dunja Mijatović, national of Bosnia and Herzegovina, is the new Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights. She has been elected last January by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. She is the first woman to hold this post, succeeding Nils Muižnieks (2012-2018), Thomas Hammarberg (2006-2012) and Alvaro Gil-Robles (1999-2006).

"I intend to keep the legacy of the previous Commissioners' work and maintain the ability of this institution to react rapidly and effectively to protect people's human rights. My view is that human rights are indeed universal and that no country is beyond scrutiny. In terms of priorities, my vision is simple. In a word, it is: implementation. Norms, resolutions, treaties are there to guide us. Yes, we do need political will to make sure they are realised. But this is not a matter only for governments. We must engage our societies at large in their implementation and involve everyone in a dialogue on human rights. It is paramount that we achieve a recommitment to and a reaffirmation of human rights for all, and bring back trust in their importance for the well-being of each and every person. I look forward to cooperating with governments, national authorities, international organisations, human rights defenders, journalists, NGOs, and human rights structures."

Source: [CoE](#)

Concerted attack of Polish fundamentalists

Since 2015 when the Law and Justice Party has come to power, atmosphere around women's rights and freedoms, including the right to abortion, is very tense. In January 2018, the MP referred a draft law banning abortion in case of foetal impairment to the committee for a further discussion. Following massive protests, the decision makers seemed to put "Stop abortion" into "a legislative freezer". The anti-choice group continued to put pressure on the politicians with letters, tweets and pickets in front of the Polish parliament. Without effect, until the Polish bishops intervened. On the March, 14 the Polish Episcopal Conference appealed for the bill to be proceeded. A day later, the Head of the Committee on Justice and Human Rights announced that the opinion on the draft law will be issued on the next Monday (19.03). This illustrates the enormous power of the Church and the strong resistance of the politicians to put human rights over their own interests in the light of the upcoming elections in 2018 (local) and 2019 (national). The opinion of the committee is necessary for another committee that is supposed to proceed the bill (Committee for Social Policy and Family). In response to bishops' political interference, the Polish Women's Strike is mobilizing women to protest in front of dioceses and curia. The Federation for Women and Family Planning has appealed to the members of the Committee to issue a negative opinion.

Restricting abortion by means of the parliament is only one of the three strategies employed by the ruling party. The second path runs through the Constitutional Tribunal. A group of extremist MPs, mainly from the ruling party Law and Justice (PiS) and Kukiz'15, submitted a motion challenging the constitutionality of abortion in case of a severe and irreversible foetal defects. They claim that it interferes with other constitutional values (respect and protection of human dignity, the legal protection of the life of every human being). The non-sovereign Tribunal promised to rule on this case in full composition, however no steps have yet been made. [More here.](#)

The third way was developed by Ordo Iuris, an ultraconservative organization of anti-choice lawyers linked to the ruling party. They drafted a bill granting foetuses patients' rights, i.e. right to medical services and perinatal care. This amendment is aimed at "empowering an unborn child in the Polish law as a person and as a patient". This may seem innocent, but in fact it is deathly dangerous in the light of current practices. Women are commonly denied an access to prenatal testing or legal abortion for the sake of the foetus (even when the pregnancy imperils their health and life). We are convinced that such a legal change will objectify women by imposing procedures that value foetuses over women. As commented by a doctor, this would turn into a inhumane treatment and perception of women as a biological environment for the foetus. It will also force doctors to pursue a futile medical care, which is unethical as it brings physical, emotional, spiritual, economic, or ethical hardship and harm. The draft law was submitted to the Ministry of Health and to the Commissioner for Patients' Rights.

To make matters worse, Ordo Iuris is deeply involved in many policies in various Ministries. Since children and teenagers belong to their main target groups, they have influenced the Ministry of National Education (MEN) to put a greater emphasis on the role of traditional, nuclear family (as the only valid option) in the curriculum of "Family Life Education". Furthermore, their manipulative report "Save our children" identifies and slanders 29 NGOs that have conducted extracurricular classes at schools. They present organizations providing education about human rights, sexuality,

LGBT+ rights, antidiscrimination (e.g. Amnesty International) as a threat to children, Catholic values and morality. In response MEN cautioned headmasters not to invite NGOs without parents' consent.

Source: [Federation for Women and Family Planning](#)

#BLACKFRIDAY mobilization in Poland

March 23 is yet another historic moment in the Polish history. Renewed attempt to ban abortion in case of foetal impairment have brought almost 90 000 people to the streets of Warsaw, not to mention other 23 cities in Poland and 13 abroad. How did it start?

On the March, 14 the Polish Episcopal Conference appealed for the "Stop abortion" bill to be proceeded. A day later, the Head of the Committee on Justice and Human Rights announced that the opinion on the draft law will be issued on the next Monday (19.03). This illustrates the enormous power of the Church and the strong resistance of the politicians to put human rights over their own interests in the light of the upcoming elections in 2018 (local) and 2019 (national). The opinion of the committee is necessary for another committee that is supposed to proceed the bill (Committee for Social Policy and Family). In response to bishops' political interference, the Polish Women's Strike organized protests in front of dioceses and curia on Sunday (18.03). The Federation for Women and Family Planning appealed to the members of the Committee to issue a negative opinion. Nevertheless members of the committee were reluctant to consider women's rights perspective during the debate and they suddenly voted for closing the list of speakers. As a result, many activists who came for this debate from other cities were excluded and did not have a chance to voice their concerns and arguments. The Committee approved the draft law.

The next step is a debate in the Committee on Social Policy and Family. Polish activists assumed that politicians will proceed the bill as quickly as possible and that the vote in the Parliament may take place on Thursday (22.03). Therefore, Friday was called a day of mass protest and feminists from all over the country were invited to come and participate in rallies and demonstrations against this draconian law. Attendance was even better than in the Black Protest. Organizers and police have assessed that as many as 90 000 people participated in the rally that started in front of the parliament and finished near the headquarter of the ruling party at Nowogrodzka street. Speakers vocally pressed two main postulates: rejection of the draft law and a negative opinion of the Constitutional Tribunal on the motion on constitutionality of the right to abortion in case of foetal impairment (more here). What was surprising? Age and gender of the participants – there were more younger persons and more men than usually; strong anticlerical message; high number of banners for legal abortion on demand. Despite very short time for organization and promotion, 75% of Poles heard about the Black Friday. Everyday there many articles and features on abortion appear in the media; abortion discussed from different perspectives and in diverse milieus. The opinion poll conducted three days after the Black Friday showed that support for Law and Justice has dropped by 12%, which is the lowest outcome since the elections. Party's stance on abortion is one of the reason behind this historic drop. Activists from Warsaw organized a picket in front of the archdiocese blocking access for bishops on Holy Thursday. many people are so outrage at the interference of the Church that they plan various actions to show their disapproval or leave the Church by means of e.g. apostasy.

Poland has received many proofs of international solidarity, including statements by the UN human rights experts, a group of MEPs, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights ([more here](#)), and over 200 NGOs from across the globe (more about their statement [here](#)).

Source: [Federation for Women and Family Planning](#)

The 37th session of the UN Human Rights Council and 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

The 37th session of the UN Human Rights Council is taking place in Geneva from February 26th until March 23rd. See the full programme of work for HRC37 [here](#).

[Click here](#) to read the summary of the anticipated sexual rights related [resolutions](#), [panels](#) and [reports](#), [UPR outcomes](#), and [parallel events](#) taking place during the 37th session put together by the Sexual Rights Initiative. Among the expected resolutions is the resolution on protecting the rights of the child in humanitarian settings (European Union, GRULAC); the implementation of Agenda 2030 for the full enjoyment of human rights (South Africa), rights of persons with disabilities (New Zealand, Mexico) and freedom of religion or belief (EU).

This session also marks the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 25th anniversary of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action. To mark this occasion a high level panel discussion on what can be done to make human rights popular again in times of increased populism and skepticism will take place on March 6th from 13:30-15:00 in Room XXIII: **Beyond jargon: Reframing our communication on human rights**. The United Nations Human Rights Deputy High Commissioner Kate Gilmore, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights Nils Muižnieks and Director of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights Michael O’Flaherty are among speakers (click [here](#) for details). Those who will not be in Geneva in person can watch the panel live on [Facebook](#).

The Sexual Rights Initiative also invites to a **side event on Sexuality Education: rights and reality** on 6th March 15:00-16:00 in room XXVII (click [here](#) for details). Objectives of the side event are to present the International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education; to discuss the role of UN Human Rights Council and States to initiate and implement CSE in formal and informal settings and to understand the best ways to implement CSE curriculum to most effectively empower young people and adults.

Source: [UNHRC](#)

Macedonia ratifies the Istanbul Convention

On March 23rd in the presence of the Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Ms Gabriella Bataini-Dragoni, Mr Petar POP-ARSOV Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, Permanent Representative of “The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” to the Council of Europe, deposited the instrument of ratification in respect of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence ([CETS No.210](#)).

The Convention will enter into force on 1st of July 2018. Macedonia becomes the 29th State to ratify the Convention.

Source: [Council of Europe](#)

Moldovan Government adopted the National Strategy on prevention and combating violence against women and domestic violence for 2018-2023

On 22 February 2018 the Government of Moldova has adopted the National Strategy on prevention and combating violence against women and domestic violence for 2018-2023, a premier for Moldova. The Strategy is aligned with the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) which sets the standards for preventing gender-based violence, protecting victims of violence and punishing perpetrators.

Among the main provisions of the National Strategy on prevention and combating violence against women and domestic violence for 2018-2023 are: Prevent violence against women and domestic violence by cultivating zero tolerance for violence. Combat stereotypes and prejudices leading to violence against women and domestic violence. Inform, raise awareness and encourage the reporting of cases of violence; Pre-service and in-service training of the professionals engaged in the prevention and combating of domestic violence based on a common vision at the state level; Strengthen the education system to ensure the education of new generations from the perspective of gender equality values and a non-violent communication culture; Strengthen the mechanisms of protection and assistance for victims of violence against women and domestic violence; Develop specialized services for victims of violence, including sexual violence, in line with the international standards; Promote women's economic empowerment and socio-economic independence; Provide integrated policies in cases of violence against women and domestic violence, based on multi-sectorial cooperation and data collection, and other specific objectives.

The study [Violence against Women in the Family](#), found that 63% of women experienced psychological, physical or sexual violence from their partner during their lifetime and one in 10 experienced economic abuse. Rural, elderly, and separated or divorced women had the highest rates of violence.

UN Women works in communities across Moldova on preventing and ending violence against women and girls, including by strengthening multi-disciplinary teams for a more efficient intervention, and empowering women to speak up and demand their rights.

Source: [UN Women Moldova](#)

National study on violence against women in Georgia in 2017

On March 6, 2018 a conference on the findings of the National Study on Violence against Women was held in Georgia by UN Women, the EU, and GEOSTAT, together with partners from the Government.

The National study on Violence against Women in Georgia 2017 constitutes the first nation-wide research on violence against women to have been conducted in Georgia since 2009 and explores the prevalence of domestic violence, non-partner physical and sexual violence, as well as perceptions and awareness of women and men on gender and violence in Georgia.

For the first time in Georgia, the study also generated data on the prevalence of sexual harassment and stalking at the national level.

Source: [HERA XXI](#)

From ASTRA Members

2nd inroads Global Member Gathering

Members of the ASTRA Network participated in the 2nd inroads Global Member Gathering in Zagreb, Croatia on March 12-16 that brought together more than 100 activists from around the world.

Inroads, the International Network for the Reduction of Abortion Discrimination and Stigma, is a global network of advocates, scholars, health providers, and donors from around the world, hosted the Inroads Global gathering that created a platform where participants could connect with new and familiar colleagues and be actively involved in many varied and highly interactive activities, providing valuable spaces to learn more about fellow network members.

Abortion stigma leads to the social, medical and legal marginalization of abortion worldwide. Though the effects of abortion stigma vary widely depending on context, we see common trends in how social and cultural norms, government and health system structure and policies, and community and individual practices are shaped by this social process. The main idea of Inroads Global gathering is to think and rethink the strategies to deal with the abortion stigma devaluing those people who have had abortions or those associated with abortion.

The 2nd Global Gathering consisted of workshops, panels, mutual learning experiences, participatory documentation, discussions, intervention demos and action planning. Participants discussed experiences of stigma, the patterns we've been seeing around us, and our goals for joining this work across our countries. We explored how one person's experience with abortion might affect many other aspects of their life, such as confidentiality, employment, family, healthcare, and more.

The rich agenda included topics such as: sharing and understanding each other's work, abortion stigma: concepts and constructs, manifestations of abortion intersecting stigmas, the power of our plurality, mapping and exploring abortion sentiment, human rights and stigma, challenges and progress by region, understanding the framing of abortion and our work, and many others.

Read the full story [here](#).

More information: <https://endabortionstigma.org>

Anti-discrimination legislation in Armenia doesn't meet international standards

At the end of February 2018 the Ministry of Justice published the [draft law](#) "On Ensuring Equality". This should be comprehensive legislation to prevent and protect all people against discrimination. However, the legislation doesn't meet international standards of protection against discrimination. Also, the proposed law doesn't include or address discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The Equal Rights Trust has [published](#) detailed legal analysis of the law and recommendations respectively.

Source: [Women's Resource Center Armenia](#)

State policy fails to fulfil women's right to safe abortion in Armenia.

The amended Law on Human Reproductive Health and Reproductive Rights has created barriers to women's access to legal abortion services in Armenia. These amendments have introduced a mandatory three day waiting period and mandatory counselling for women seeking abortion. For many women, especially those living in rural communities, these are barriers to accessing legal and safe abortion because it increases the amount of time they have to take off work to attend additional medical appointments and counselling sessions. Also, clinics are often only in larger towns and cities, so women living in rural communities need to spend more time and money on travel. The additional requirements have the effect of making it hard harder for women to access abortion services. These are the main findings of the research implemented by the Women's Resource Center Armenia in rural communities of Armenia.

According to the research, another obstacle which women in Armenia face regarding access to abortion is the "physician-only" law, which makes abortion a crime unless performed by a licensed physician. This also includes medical abortion. The law in reality means that medical abortion services women can access only by visiting physicians and those are also the most expensive. The average price for medical abortion is \$40 which is not affordable for many women therefore pushing them to unregulated, illegal and unsafe back-street practitioners.

There was a recent case in Armenia where a woman died after terminating her pregnancy. The woman could not afford to go to a clinic due to a high rate of the abortion, according to the testimonies of her relatives. This is just one case illustrating how women risk their lives when accessing abortion services in Armenia.

During a recent meeting with the representative from the Ministry of Health, the representative said if they could save even one life and convince a woman not to terminate her pregnancy, then they would be more than happy. This makes it clear that for the Ministry of Health, the issue is not women's rights to bodily autonomy, but rather it is an anti-abortion and pro-life position and trying to stop women from this. In holding this position, the Ministry is failing to take into consideration the fact that women will still want abortions, regardless of the Ministry's stance on it, and the law will only push women into illegal and unsafe routes.

Source: [Women's Resource Center Armenia](#)

Mobilizing human rights defenders on the issue of abortion from a women's rights perspective

The Women's Resource Center Armenia has initiated a series of workshops with civil society representatives on the issue of abortion. Many human rights defenders are not gender sensitive in the field of abortion and therefore we have placed great importance on organizing a series of meetings with them to inform them about abortion rights and realities. In this way we will develop their gender sensitivity and hope to develop a broader community of allies.

Source: [Women's Resource Center Armenia](#)

International Women's Day in Zagreb

The Night March in Zagreb was organized by the feminist collective 'fAKTIV' — initiative of mostly younger feminists which took on a very challenging task — to bring back the politics of disobedience and activism into the celebration of women's day. and this year Night march was also organised in Split, Rijeka, Zadar and Šibenik.

The keywords for 2018 year's march are "anger", "resistance" and "change" in response to constant attacks on non-profit media and human rights organizations, obstruction of the ratification of the Istanbul Convention and relativization of the violence against women, potential changes in abortion legislation, obstruction of the curriculum reform.

The Night March gathered a thousand protesters with common goal to fight for abortion rights, for a free and good public health system, for accessible public services, education, guaranteed employment, solidary housing and pension policy. In the last few years in Croatia, the question of abortion became the battlefield for moral debates among the neoconservatives. Feminists are fighting to bring the question of abortion into the field of the fundamental reproductive rights and women's health care. This year again during the Night March we demanded free abortion: only free abortion makes abortion accessible to everyone. Of course, conscientious objection shouldn't have a place in medicine!

Source: [Political Critique](#)

Croatia to ratify the Istanbul Convention

After the long campaign and pressure by NGOs and opposition, the Croatian government finally forwarded to the parliament a bill on the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. Taking into account the concern of ultraconservative stakeholders and Catholic Church, the Government also adopted an interpretive statement in Article 4 of the bill on the ratification of the Convention which include three messages - that the Convention does not imply assuming any obligation to introduce anything that would be contrary to Croatia's legal order, that it does not introduce gender ideology in the country's legal system and that it does not change the definition of marriage.

A few days later, around 8 000 of Croatians have rallied in central Zagreb against the Istanbul convention, saying it threatens traditional values and that the convention is "against Christianity". Speakers at the rally called on Prime Minister to resign over his support for the convention. Ultra-conservative groups object the Istanbul Convention on the basis that it promotes "gender ideology," it would legitimize same-sex marriage and improve rights for transgender people. The Catholic Church clergy have said that all those who support the Istanbul Convention should no longer be considered believers. Church organisations have demanded a referendum on ratification, despite polls which suggest two-thirds of Croatians support the treaty.

Several smaller counter-protests were set up along the route of the march by women's rights groups holding banners with messages supporting gender equality and the ratification of the Convention.

Source: [CESI](#)

#Thankstheflowers but I want respect! Online feminist campaign in Romania, March 1-8

ASTRA's member, Society for Feminist Analyses AnA, has been part of the annual online campaign "#Thankstheflowers but I want respect!" developed and carried out by a strong group of feminists.

In the month of March women are celebrated with flowers and gifts. Simple or overly festive gestures galore, devoid of the redemptive resonance of the 8th of March celebration. Moreover, flowers are sometimes offered by men who, otherwise, disregard, harass or bully women. Or by men who are accomplices with the ill-doers, by their own distrust and lack of support toward the women affected by insults, humiliation, harassment and violence. Men who do not hold accountable other men who mock women with their sexist jokes, who now mime respect.

Thanks for the flowers, but we denounce this hypocrisy! Thanks for the flowers, but the 8th of March is the international day for claiming women's rights and commemorate women's struggle for equality.

In Romania, a case of rape of a woman in the family is reported every week. The case of an underage girl raped or sexually harassed by an adult in the family is registered every 2 days. Yet, many cases of violence against women and girls go unreported and unpunished. A European survey shows that 55% of Romanians believe rape can be justified; people do not intervene in cases of domestic violence even to call the emergency number 112; 30% of Romanians believe it's women's own fault that they are beaten up.

The flowers given to women on the 8th of March cannot alleviate this harsh reality. They cannot dispel the grin-riddled sick jokes about rape. They cannot lessen catcalls such as „whore”, „slut”, „hustler”, „tramp”, „hooker”, „doll”, „hussy”. Flowers cannot wipe out the hand on one's bottom while riding the bus. They cannot delete the disgusting sexual innuendos at the office or at school. They cannot relieve the fear of walking out at night. They cannot diminish the pain felt with every single slap, every kind of abuse, every time one is sentenced to humiliation.

The flowers given to women on the 8th of March do not make us forgive governmental bodies for their criminal incompetence that has led to the killing of Alexandra Marin and Nicoleta Botan, as well as other women like them. The complaints lodged with the police and the protection order did not save their lives. How many more women must die because of the impotence of the system to protect us? How much more humiliation and scorn can we still stand from authorities, politicians, policemen, judges?

The flowers given to women on the 8th of March do not talk about the atrocious marginalization and stigma of invisible women in our society. About the vulnerability of trafficked women, homeless women, about the suffering of girls abused in institutions, about the violence sexual workers are confronted with. About the hatred Roma women are treated with. About the trauma of women who left to work abroad, who oftentimes end up business owners' sexual slaves.

The 8th of March is about solidarity among women and solidarity with women. The 8th of March is about the common struggle to create a society that should no longer tolerate abuse towards women. The 8th of March is about mobilization and redemption.

For several months, the #metoo phenomenon has been unearthing instances of abuse women have been subjected to. The enormous number of testimonials and their impactful emotion have shed long-awaited light on the darkness and loneliness in which women live and feel the violence cast upon them, in every shape or form. For the women who have had the courage to denounce the violence and their aggressors, the #metoo moment is a historic one. On the 8th of March, we celebrate the women who inspire us with their force to break the silence about violence.

On the 8th of March we state loud and clear that we no longer have patience and understanding for the men who choose to be stuck in a toxic, violent, oppressive and coercive masculinity toward women.

Support the campaign: <https://www.facebook.com/events/186591808614009/>

Romanian member of the EuroNGOs Steering Committee

ATSRA member from Romania, Daniela Draghici, has been reelected to the Steering Committee of the EuroNGOs (The European NGOs for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, Population and Development) for the third term. Daniela has been involved in numerous EuroNGOs-related events and activities for ten years now and she also had the distinct opportunity to serve on the EuroNGOs for two consecutive terms, 2012 through 2015. After a two-year break, Daniela is happy to be back on the Steering Committee. What drives her? She wants to be close to the battlefield, particularly now that times are harder than before for SRHR advocacy, while money is tighter than ever before in this line of work, when donors are shying away from supporting such efforts and many more governments are restricting access to SRHR-related information, policies and services. Read her editorial note featured in the newsletter [here](#).

GLOBAL UPDATES

Parliament in Cyprus decriminalises abortion

After years of discussion parliament on Friday passed with an overwhelming majority a law decriminalising abortion. Access to abortion – which had remained largely stagnant out of fear of reprisal from the church – was voted into law with 33 votes in favour, eight against and five abstentions. The new law will allow termination of an unwanted pregnancy up to 12 weeks of gestation. In case of rape, an abortion can take place up to 19 weeks.

Source: [Cyprus Mail](#)

Ireland sets May date for historic abortion referendum

Vote on 25 May will offer citizens opportunity to overhaul the anti-women law on abortion

Ireland will vote in a referendum on 25 May on liberalising its strict abortion laws, the government has confirmed, in an announcement that officially begins two months of campaigning.

Abortion has long been a divisive issue in the once stridently Catholic country. A complete ban was only lifted in 2013, when terminations were allowed in cases where the woman's life was in danger. Voters will be asked if they want to repeal article 40.3.3 – known as the eighth amendment – which since 1983 has given unborn fetuses and pregnant women an equal right to life, in effect enshrining a ban on abortion in the country's constitution. If Ireland votes in favour of repeal, the government has said it will introduce legislation permitting unrestricted abortion during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy.

Currently, terminations are only allowed when the life of the mother is at risk, and the maximum penalty for accessing an illegal abortion is 14 years in prison. The UN's human rights committee has condemned the ban as "cruel, inhuman and degrading". The health minister, Simon Harris, and housing minister, Eoghan Murphy, signed the order to set the date of the historic vote after legislation allowing for it was passed in the Seanad, the second chamber of the Irish parliament. Polls will open at 7am on 25 May and close at 10pm. "Whatever your views are on the proposals in the referendum, can I take this opportunity to encourage voters to go to their polling station during this 15-hour period on 25 May and have your say in the outcome of the referendum," Murphy said.

Harris said: "It is really important that people do not sit at home and presume somebody else will make the decision for you. If you feel as strongly as we do that there needs to be change in this area, you need to come out and vote." Inside the Seanad one veteran pro-choice campaigner predicted "an intense campaign" over the next eight weeks.

Senator Ivana Bacik, who almost went to jail for distributing information about abortion clinics in England to Irish students in the 1990s, said opponents of reform were "in denial about the hypocrisy of Irish law". The prime minister, Leo Varadkar of Fine Gael, and the Fianna Fáil opposition leader, Micheál Martin, are backing a yes vote. Martin stunned his party by changing his previous position and supporting abortion reform.

The religious right in Ireland, particularly lay Catholic groups, see the referendum as their last chance to roll back 25 years of social liberal change.

In 2015 [Ireland voted by a huge majority to legalise same-sex marriage](#), becoming the first country in the world to do so by popular vote. But both sides in the current debate believe that the vote this time will be considerably tighter.

Source: [The Guardian](#)

The 37th session of the UN Human Rights Council

The 37th session of the UN Human Rights Council took place in Geneva from February 26th until March 23rd. Click [here](#) to find information on some of the key sexual rights related resolutions, oral statements, side events and panels put together by the Sexual Rights Initiative.

This session also marked the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 25th anniversary of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action.

[Click here to learn more about HRC 37](#)

YOUTH

Ponton's Open Doors Day on March 6

It was an opportunity to get to know and talk to educators about how to work in a volunteer group dealing with sex education. The visitors could take part in a workshop on sexually transmitted infections, with special emphasis on HIV/AIDS, and the group shared some of their educational materials in the form of publications such as the "How to grow up and not go crazy?" leaflets about sexually transmitted infections, and free condoms!

Source: [Ponton Group of Sex Educators](#)

Ponton Group at the 4th National Student's Sexology Conference

A Ponton representative participated in the conference that took place on March 24. The event was organized by the Student Scientific Association of Sexology and Clinical Psychology of the Poznań University of Medical Sciences in Poland. This year's theme was "Sexology in an interdisciplinary perspective."

Source: [Ponton Group of Sex Educators](#)

A Polish-British PeerEx project in women's rights

One of Ponton's educators represented the group during the event in Warsaw - UK-Poland PeerEx project, organized by the Euclid Network. The project edition was focused on organizations working for women's rights. The activists talked about fundraising, inclusiveness and diversity, partnership, relations with the government, self-care, movement building. The participants were hosted by the British Embassy in Warsaw and a local partner - the Congress of Women Association.

Source: [Ponton Group of Sex Educators](#)

Visit of [Youth Ambassador SRHR of the Netherlands](#) in Georgia

On March 12, Melodi Tamarzians, the Dutch Youth Ambassador for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights visited Georgia. The main purpose of her visit was to get to know Georgia's situation regarding universal access to youth friendly SRHR services. During her time in Georgia, Melodi Tamarzians held meetings with local civil society organizations working on sexual and reproductive health and rights, conducted a focus discussion with a group of teenagers about sexuality education and facilitated workshops to learn about the experiences of young people in Tbilisi.

Source: [HERA XXI](#)

Presentation of a sex education website and mobile app for parents – [forparents.ge](#)

Association HERA XXI continues conducting awareness raising campaigns for parents which aim to promote the creation of positive environment and outlook in Georgia for Comprehensive Sexuality Education. In order to achieve this goal, HERA XXI conducted a series of campaigns in five regions of Georgia (Tbilisi, Akhaltsikhe, Khobi, Khelvachauri and Tserovani) within one month that covered more than 250 representatives of target group. During the campaigns representatives of HERA XXI presented the newly launched online platform [forparents.ge](#) which was developed to help parents to inform their children about SRHR, as well as about healthy lifestyle by taking into the consideration the age appropriate psychological and cultural aspects of adolescents.

Source: [HERA XXI](#)

New publications

"Speak My Language" - Abortion Storytelling in Eastern Europe from a Youth Perspective 2.0

This practical guidelines document was created to complement [the first toolkit](#), and as a resource which focuses on the practical aspects of developing and running a session on the abortion stigma using the storytelling technique.

Storytelling is not the only way to combat abortion stigma, but it is a powerful and necessary tool. We believe storytelling can be a form of activism, can contribute to research, can inform policies, and

can benefit the person telling the story and others in similar situations. Storytelling can be used in a myriad of different ways, whether it is to raise awareness, to create a space for discussion and reflection, to provide new and diverse perspectives on a sensitive topic, or to challenge the abortion stigma that is still highly prevalent in today's societies all over the world.

While the first toolkit provided a more theoretical description of storytelling as a method to challenge abortion stigma and raise awareness, this practical guidelines document aims to provide detailed, practical steps to help organizations, individuals and professionals organize their own storytelling session.

This resource has been developed by YouAct in close collaboration with the following local partners: Real People, Real Vision from Georgia; Health Education and Research Association (H.E.R.A.) from the Republic of Macedonia; The Association for Liberty and Equality of Gender (A.L.E.G.) from Romania and ASTRA Youth – The Federation for Women and Family Planning from Poland

This resource will take you through 6 steps: Brainstorm & Research; Finding & Sharing Stories; Ensuring Safety; Running a Session; Support Provision; and Reporting, with the hope of providing you with the resources and tools necessary to run a successful storytelling session.

Access the new “Speak My Language” toolkit [here](#).

Source: [YouAct](#)

RESOURCES

Suffocating the movement – shrinking space for women's rights

Kvinna till Kvinna launched this week a very interesting report: “Suffocating the movement – shrinking space for women's rights”. Due to growing nationalism, extremism and traditional values, women's rights organizations are now facing major setbacks in their ability to work for gender equality and peace.

Through different tactics and methods, state and non-state actors are limiting our rights to act and express ourselves. For women, who normally are excluded from the political arena, the civil society is a key arena to work for change.

Read more about what this is, how women are affected and why it is happening in the report which includes input from our region; Macedonia, Azerbaijan, Poland and more.

[Download the report “Suffocating the movement – shrinking space for women's rights”.](#)

[Link to webiste](#)

Challenges facing civil society organisations working on human rights in the EU

Civil society organisations in the European Union play a crucial role in promoting fundamental rights, but it has become harder for them to do so – due to both legal and practical restrictions. This report looks at the different types and patterns of challenges faced by civil society organisations working on human rights in the EU.

While challenges exist in all EU Member States, their exact nature and extent vary. Data and research on this issue – including comparative research – are generally lacking. The report also highlights promising practices that can counteract these worrying patterns.

Access the report by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights [HERE](#)

Source: [FRA](#)

What does it mean when sexuality and reproduction are criminalized? New Amnesty International publications

The criminalization of sexuality and reproduction around the world is a major barrier to human rights, and denies millions of us our human dignity.

This is why Amnesty International has launched [Body Politics: Criminalization of Sexuality and Reproduction](#), a new series of tools to empower activists worldwide to challenge criminalization and stand up for their rights.

What is criminalization of sexuality and reproduction?

The criminalization of sexuality and reproduction is when consensual sexual and reproductive actions and decisions, or the expression of sexual and gender identities, is restricted or punished.

Sometimes this happens through direct regulation, such as criminal bans on abortion. At other times, a range of laws and policies relating to public order or “morality” are used to indirectly police and punish sexual and reproductive choices or gender expression.

These laws can easily be abused. For example, criminalizing “adultery” violates human rights and can also put women who have been raped at risk of prosecution for sexual activity outside marriage.

How and where does this play out?

In some Latin American countries and many US states there are increasing restrictions on abortion access and laws that punish women for their actions during pregnancy.

In Europe and North America, the actions of people living with HIV have attracted increasing attention from legislators and prosecutors.

In many African states, the use of laws to criminalize same-sex sexual conduct has intensified.

In parts of Asia and the Middle East and North Africa, criminal prohibition of sexual activity outside marriage, and restrictions on access to basic sexual health information or services continue to undermine the sexual and reproductive rights of whole groups.

Who is impacted?

Such punitive laws and policies often disproportionately affect people who do not or cannot conform to dominant social norms because of their identities or because of decisions they make in relation to their economic circumstances, their sex, race, gender expression, sexual orientation, or their immigration, health or disability status.

Most people who face sanctions or imprisonment for sexual and reproductive “crimes” are, in reality, being punished for actions and decisions related to poverty, social exclusion, identity or their status in society. For example, laws policing pregnant women’s behaviour result in racial and gender discrimination and particularly impact low-income women and those unable to access healthcare services. Laws punishing sex work target those who have few other options, and increase stigma and discrimination.

Through the Body Politics series, Amnesty International is showing that it’s time to stand up against unjust criminalization of people’s bodies, sexualities, reproduction and gender expression.

The Body Politics Primer helps to build the movement’s knowledge and capacity to challenge unjust criminalization, and the Body Politics Toolkit promotes strategic campaigning on these issues. It is designed to empower activists and individuals to raise awareness and stand up for their rights.

Amnesty International will be releasing the third part of the series, the Body Politics Training Manual, later in 2018.

See Amnesty International's [Body Politics Primer](#) and [Body Politics Toolkit](#)

New Report Highlights Worldwide Variations in Abortion Incidence and Safety

A comprehensive new report released by the Guttmacher Institute highlights ongoing disparities in abortion rates and in access to safe abortion services in developing and developed regions. The report, [Abortion Worldwide 2017: Uneven Progress and Unequal Access](#), pulls together the latest research on abortion incidence, safety and legality, as well as on unintended pregnancy. Globally, rates of abortion have declined over the past 25 years. In addition, evidence in the report demonstrates that procedures have become safer in many parts of the world.

For more information, read the full report: [Abortion Worldwide 2017: Uneven Progress and Unequal Access](#) by Susheela Singh, Lisa Remez, Gilda Sedgh, Lorraine Kwok and Tsuyoshi Onda

Source: [Guttmacher Institute](#)

UPCOMING EVENTS

51st Session of the UN Commission on Population and Development

The 51st Session of the Commission on Population and Development (CPD) will take place from 9 to 13 April 2018 at the UN Headquarters in New York. The theme of the session is “Sustainable cities, human mobility and international migration.” [Registration](#) for the CDP is open from 1 November 2017 to 16 March 2018.

More information can be found on the CPD website [here](#)

ASTRA Network Members: Albania - Albanian Family Planning Association; Armenia - Society Without Violence; Armenia - Women’s Resource Center; Armenia - Women’s Rights Center; Azerbaijan - Center “Women and Modern World”; Belarus - Women’s Independent Democratic Movement of Belarus; Bulgaria - Bulgarian Family Planning and Sexual Health Association; Bulgaria - Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation; Bulgaria - Gender Education, Research and Technologies; Bulgaria - Demetra Association; Bulgaria - Gender Alternatives Foundation; Bosnia and Herzegovina – Sarajevo Open Center; Croatia - B.a.b.e.; Croatia – CESI; Croatia - Women’s Room; Georgia – HERA XXI; Georgia – Real People, Real Vision; Georgia - Women’s Center; Hungary – PATENT; Kazakhstan - The Legal Center for Women’s Initiatives “Sana Sezim”; Lithuania - Family Planning and Sexual Health Association; Latvia - Latvia’s Association for Family Planning And Sexual Health; Macedonia - Association for emancipation, solidarity and equality of women; Macedonia – H.E.R.A.; Macedonia – Shelter Center; Moldova – Family Planning Association; Moldova - Reproductive Health Training Center; Poland - Federation for Women and Family Planning; Romania - A.L.E.G.; Romania - AnA: Society for Feminist Analysis; Romania - Euroregional Center for Public Initiatives; Romania - The East European Institute of Reproductive Health; Russia - Novogorod Gender Center; Russia – Russian Association for Population and Development; Slovakia – Pro Choice; Tajikistan – Gender and Development; Ukraine - Women Health and Family Planning; Ukraine - Charitable SALUS Foundation; Uzbekistan - Future Generation

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Supported by the [Sigrid Rausing Trust](#)

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