

**FEDERATION FOR WOMEN AND FAMILY PLANNING with ECOSOC status, serving as
ASTRA Network Secretariat**

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2nd Thematic Session: Families, Sexual and Reproductive Health over the Life Course

Thank you for the opportunity to deliver this statement on behalf of the Federation for Women and Family Planning from Poland and ASTRA Network, the premier regional network of non-governmental organizations from 19 countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) which advocate for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and gender equality. ASTRA welcomes the UNECE Regional Report which marks an end to the ICPD Review Process in the European region and also a beginning of a new development framework. The Regional Report covers numerous aspects of population and development and provides us with findings of the ICPD+20 Review Process in this region. As a member of the European civil society I would like to address some of those issues as well as a few additional ones.

One of the biggest challenges for many women across the CEE region is access to safe and legal abortion. Central and Eastern Europe continues to have much higher abortion rate than Western Europe, yet the numbers are often underreported. The findings of the UNECE Review Process state that abortion rates have declined across the region with the greatest decline to be observed in the eastern part of it. Even though most countries of the CEE region have liberal laws on abortion we are now in the center of a great backlash aimed at women's right to choose. Only a few weeks ago Macedonia introduced new laws which restrict access to abortion and Lithuania is one step away from introducing a restrictive law which is almost a copy of the law existing in Poland¹. According to this law, abortion is legal only when the pregnancy is the result of a crime, when it poses a threat to the life or health of the woman and in cases of fetal malformation. As the annual reports from the Polish Ministry of Health state there were 669 abortions in 2011 and not a single one resulting from rape or any other crime². This figure, in a country of over 38 million inhabitants, illustrates how difficult it is to access a legal abortion in practice. The Polish Government constantly ignores the harmful effects of

¹ www.astra.org.pl

² http://www.mz.gov.pl/wwwfiles/ma_struktura/docs/sprawozdzust_matdziec_20121123.pdf

the current legislation. According to results of a study conducted by a Polish public opinion research institute, at least one-quarter, possibly up to one-third of women in Poland, have had an abortion at least once. This adds up to 4,1 million to 5,8 million women³. As the 20 year long experience of the Federation for Women and Family Planning shows the effect of Poland's restrictive law is not the reduction of the number of procedures but the elimination of abortions performed in a safe, legal environment and a great rise in abortion tourism and abortion underground rates⁴. There are no grounds to assume that limiting access to abortion will result in lower abortion rates. This gap remains unaddressed by the Regional Report and thus not reflected in the findings. Moreover, the data concerning abortions in the CEE region remains to be unreliable as the numbers are underreported.

The noted by the report sharp decline in fertility in the region, aging of the society and high mortality rates provide a favorable political climate driven by demographic targets. Although abortion is one of the most contentious issues within the ICPD Programme of Action, it is regarded as an integral component of SRHR and should be put in the center of concern regarding women's access to sexual and reproductive health services. Limiting access to safe abortion services is regarded as institutional violence against women. Selective approaches which include prevention of unwanted pregnancies but not support safe abortion do in fact violate human rights and lead to detrimental outcomes. Moreover, in early 2013, UN Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment stated in his report that denial of legal abortion can amount to torture or ill-treatment⁵. Additionally the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to health emphasized that abortion restrictions are discriminatory in their nature and violate the right to health⁶.

ASTRA Network urges governments of the region to take women's right to a free choice into serious consideration and respect their human rights as a whole.

Thank you for your attention.

³ http://www.federa.org.pl/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1163:new-study-says-one-in-four-women-in-poland-had-an-abortion&catid=78:news&Itemid=114

⁴ www.federa.org.pl

⁵ Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, 2013, A/HRC/22/53

⁶ Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to health, 2011, A/66/254.