



## **CEE Bulletin on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights**

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### **BURNING ISSUE**

#### **Beijing+25 Regional Review Meeting in Geneva**

Key stakeholders, like activists, advocates and politicians from North America, Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, gathered in Geneva at the end of October to take stock of implementation of Beijing commitments, women's and girl's human rights and gender equality.

Hosted by UNECE and UN Women, Beijing+25 Regional Review Meeting reviewed progress and persisting challenges, showcasing practical policy approaches that can help remove the structural barriers that hold women back from equal participation in all areas of life.

Many problems discussed in Beijing are still a problem today in the 56 countries members of the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE). Altynai Omurbekova, Deputy Prime Minister of the

Kyrgyz Republic and co-chair of the meeting called for taking action instead of settling for hopes and plans.

Other participants put emphasis on the need for faster and stronger progress for women and girls, as well as realization of the Beijing commitments to protect women's rights. In the past years, countries in the region of Europe and Central Asia have put a particular focus on three main areas: combating violence against women, women's economic empowerment and political participation.

"A quarter of a century after Beijing, not a single country has achieved gender equality. Beijing+25 and the global drive to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals provide us a unique opportunity to accelerate efforts, strengthen our partnerships and mobilize all of society, including all generations, to fulfill the longstanding commitments to women and girls," said Åsa Regnér, Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations and Deputy Executive Director of UN Women.

In 2020, UN Women will hold The Generation Equality Forum, a global gathering for gender equality, which will be co-chaired by France and Mexico, with the leadership and partnership of civil society. The Forum will start in Mexico City, Mexico, on 7-8 May 2020 and end in Paris, France, on 7-10 July 2020.

The assessment of the regional review will feed into the global Beijing+25 review in 2020 which will take place at the 64th session of the Commission on the Status of Women in March. In September 2020, the General Assembly is expected to convene a one-day high-level meeting to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary and accelerate the realization of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.

## REGIONAL UPDATES

### **Women's Resource Center of Armenia faces legal prosecution**

ASTRA's member organisation, Women's Resource Center based in Armenia, faces legal prosecution after months of receiving threats from Armenian nationalists and far-right movements. The organisation issued an open letter with an explanation of the situation, attached below.

*Enough!*

*A call to action to protect women human rights defenders and stop legal pressures against the Women's Resource Center and the Sexual Assault Crisis Center in Armenia*

*We, women human rights defenders of the Women's Resource Center and the Sexual Assault Crisis Center have been working since 2003 to protect and support women and girls survivors of gender-based violence including sexual assault, often in very hostile reality. We contributed immensely in raising awareness on women's reproductive and sexual health and rights, combatting different stereotypes and practices putting women's rights, well-being and safety in danger.*

*Over the years, we have added our strong voices, leadership and collective actions to strengthen democratic efforts and movements in society where human rights, rule of law and equality are core values.*

*Today after the velvet revolution, despite the many positive developments, we are facing a climate of increasing repression, hate speech and violence from extremist and nationalist groups as well as*

*impunity despite public calls from the new state representatives to create democratic, non-violent society where all are equal and protected. Some members of these groups started their attacks on us back in 2013 and more joined after the revolution, among them are fervent supporters of the former oligarchic corrupt regime.*

*For the past year, a smear campaign on social media was launched against our founder Lara Aharonian, full of hate speech, threats and call for violence. Although a criminal case was initiated to investigate the events, later on the case was suspended. We insist that the investigation was ineffective. Earlier during the year, a book launch event on prevention of sexual assault against children in one of the local bookstores, "Bookinist" was attacked by a group of nationalists who took over the space, disrupted the event by throwing eggs on the organizers from the Sexual Assault Crisis Center and insulting them publicly. Again despite a report to the police, no case was initiated and no one was held accountable. Following this event, another public library annulled a similar event hosted by the Sexual Assault Crisis Center, fearing the same kind of attacks on their premises.*

*Not only most of our attempts to gain justice through legal processes are often met with indifference and impunity, but recently, a legal criminal case was initiated against us by order of the Prosecutor General's office, following pressures from the same extremist groups, stating that our sexual education website serakanutyun.org prepared by a group of experts in the field for parents and teenagers is spreading pornographic materials.*

*Our website is presently under investigation. This is another clear attempt to put pressure on us and disturb our work. It is an effort to limit our freedom of expression, and our right to association and assembly. Initiation of criminal proceeding is used as a legal tool to limit our activities that are sensitive and silence us. We feel that this kind of approaches and the impunity around these actions by law enforcement bodies are a clear attack to our organization and a threat to civil society and democracy overall.*

*We urge the authorities to live up to their obligations and responsibilities to reinforce protection mechanisms for women human rights defenders like Lara Aharonian and the collective of the Women's Resource Center and the Sexual Assault Crisis Center, ensure that all forms of hate, attacks, threats and discrimination towards us and our organisations are duly investigated and prosecuted and that legal tools are not used to silence and limit our work for human rights and equality.*

*We also urge the international human rights community and agencies to monitor closely the situation and remind the government of Armenia of its international obligations.*

*Collective and members of the Women's Resource Center and the Sexual Assault Crisis Center*

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

### **Bill criminalising sex education in Poland**

On 16th October, the Polish parliament voted in favor of a bill known as "Stop paedophilia", which assumes a change in the provision of Article 200b of the Polish Penal Code (Art. 200b. Whoever publicly promotes or approves a minor engaging in any form of sexual activity shall be subject to a fine, the penalty of restriction of liberty or the penalty of deprivation of liberty for up to 2 years.) The bill aims to criminalise "the promotion of underage sexual activity" and would basically ban providing or promoting sex education. Teachers, sex educators and healthcare providers who inform young people about their sexuality would face up to 3 years in prison if their activity was considered

“promotion of sexual activity” – this vague term may include doctors prescribing contraceptives for anyone under 18 or teachers explaining the role of contraceptives in STI/STD prevention. The bill concerns people under the age of 18, while the age of consent in Poland is 15. The first reading of the bill took place on 15th October and it will go to a parliamentary commission for further work.

The bill was a citizens' initiative, i.e. it was signed by at least 100,000 people. However, it outraged many Poles who gathered in cities across Poland to protest against the bill.

Ponton Group of Sex Educators expressed its sharp disagreement with this policy in the position that can be found [here](#).

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

## FROM ASTRA MEMBERS

### **Improving Quality and Access to Abortion Services in the EECA Region**

The Regional Reproductive Health and Rights Coalition, coordinated by the Reproductive Health Training Center, is continuing to make progress in a concerted effort to reduce barriers and maximize accessibility to safe abortion services. As part of a three-year regional project supported by the Safe Abortion Action Fund, six of the twelve Coalition member countries committed themselves to updating their national abortion protocols to be better aligned with WHO guidelines. In the first year and a half of the project's implementation, five countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan) have carried out detailed situational analyses evaluating existing abortion services and assessing how they compare with international recommendations. The full analyses have recently been published in English and can be accessed through the Coalition's [website](#).

In addition, based on the results of the situational analyses, three countries (Armenia, Moldova, and Uzbekistan) have begun revising their national abortion protocols, receiving input from a range of national, regional, and international experts along the way. Other participating countries are also expected to begin the revision process in the near future.

Source: [Reproductive Health Training Center](#)

### **North Macedonia Government is supporting Comprehensive Sexuality Education**

The Government of North Macedonia adopted a [decision](#) to start a pilot program for Comprehensive Sexuality Education within the 9<sup>th</sup> grade of primary schools in the country.

This came as a result of a two-year long advocacy process within the national working group consisted of representatives from the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, Bureau for education development, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Finance and HERA, that was aimed at identifying national strategies for improvement of the sexuality education content in the formal educational system.

According to the 3-years Operational Plan for piloting CSE, the project should start in 2021, after all of the needed steps were to be completed: preparation of training materials for the teachers, training for

the teachers and preparation and piloting the instruments for evaluation of the pilot program. Results of the pilot project should enable the preparation of a comprehensive model and a plan for introducing the sexuality education in the schools according to the needs of the youth and the reforms within the educational system.

In line with this action for CSE introduction in the country, a telephone research conducted by HERA in July 2019 showed positive attitudes and opinions of the parents regarding improving sexuality education topics. According to the research, very high percent of the parents, between 82% and 96%, agreed that young people should learn about topics which are part of the CSE.

The highest percent of parent's consent (95%) was given to the topics regarding (1) Protection of violence against women, (2) Services and medical assistance for the risk of STIs and HIV, (3) Protection of unplanned pregnancy, (4) Mechanisms of protection of sexual and reproductive rights, and (5) Body Changes in the puberty. Although at high percent (82%), however, the lowest consensus was given to the importance of giving a consent to engage in a sexual intercourse, especially the first time.

According to measured attitudes towards comprehensive sex education, parents still significantly (between 34% - 36%) support traditional roles of men and women in society, and for more than half of them (59%) homosexuality is not yet socially acceptable. This indicates that issues related to diversity, sexual orientation and gender equality, i.e. issues that are being studied within the topics of (1) Citizenship and (2) Gender, should be age-adjusted in order to build positive values regarding sexual identities and equality between women and men, but at the same time to work on reduction of stigma and discrimination against certain groups in the society.

The research findings and the government's decision to pilot a sexuality education program in primary schools are just another proof of the readiness of both policy makers and parents to finally introduce sex education into teaching. In addition to the expressed political will, it is of highest importance the Government to allocate a budget funds in 2020 for the effective implementation of the pilot program.

The research findings are available in [English](#).

Source: [HERA](#)

### **Breast Cancer Awareness Month initiative in Armenia**

On September 28, the International Safe Abortion Day and the following weeks we started a social media campaign for raising awareness on abortion issues and talked about the problems Armenian women face when it comes to taking care of their reproductive health. While we had encouraging comments and response from our mainly female audience, unfortunately, there were anti-abortion and anti-choice reactions as well. Since the following weeks were in October which is the month of Breast Cancer Awareness, we tried to also raise awareness of the fact that abortions don't lead to breast cancer and don't increase the chance of getting one. We made posts talking about how safe abortions save lives and stressed the importance of a woman's right to choose.

Facebook post about the initiative is available in Armenian [here](#).

### **Experts meet to talk SRHR, thanks to Women's Resource Center**

On October 8, the Women's Resource Center NGO held a working meeting on the topic "Women's Reproductive Health and Rights Agenda in RA: Challenges and Solutions", during which experts

presented two researches. One of them was [“The views of the Armenian Reproductive Rights Legislation”](#) and the second one was the [“Gynecologists' attitudes on the abortion procedure”](#). The meeting was attended by a number of public health experts, members of the National Assembly, representatives of state agencies, members of NGOs and international organizations concerned with the issues of women's reproductive health and reproductive rights.

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

## RESOURCES

### **SRHM Journal compiles publications about SRHR, just in time for ICPD25**

Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters Journal has published a set of texts covering sexual and reproductive health and rights in the context of ICPD25. The compilation consists of an editorial and 9 commentaries on topics such as SRHR and HIV, adolescent SRHR, violence against women and use of technology in fight for SRHR.

The compilation can be accessed [here](#).

## UPCOMING EVENTS

### **Nairobi Summit in Nairobi, Kenya on 12-14 November**

From 12-14 November, the governments of Kenya and Denmark and UNFPA are co-convening the Nairobi Summit on ICPD25, a high-level conference to mobilize the political will and financial commitments we urgently need to finally and fully implement the ICPD Programme of Action. These commitments will be centred around achieving zero unmet need for family planning information and services, zero preventable maternal deaths, and zero sexual and gender-based violence and harmful practices against women and girls.

The Summit aims to bring everyone together: heads of state, ministers, parliamentarians, thought-leaders, technical experts, civil society organizations, grassroots organizations, young people, business and community leaders, faith-based organizations, indigenous peoples, international financial institutions, people with disabilities, academics and many others interested in the pursuit of sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Source: [Nairobi Summit website](#)

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 - Novgorod 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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