



A S T R A N E T W O R K

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BURNING ISSUE

Poland uses COVID-19 pandemics to push for further restrictions in access to sexual and reproductive rights

In the midst of coronavirus pandemics, the Polish Sejm decided to proceed with the 1st reading of the two scandalous legislative proposals. The reading will take place on 15-16 of April, while the free movement of persons and freedom of assembly are gravely limited due to public health grounds and protests against the bills cannot happen on the streets.

The first legislative initiative called “Stop abortion” has been brought for Sejm’s attention in 2017 and following the wide social protests froze in the parliamentary commission until now. The bill provides for a prohibition of termination of pregnancy due to severe and irreversible foetal impairments and deletes this ground for abortion in the Law on the Family Planning of 1993. This bill would mean in practice a total abortion ban (98% of abortions in Poland are performed on this grounds). As a consequence of this ban, it would be impossible for women to access a reliable information about the condition of the foetus. Lack of reliable diagnosis would deprive pregnant persons of the possibility to decide on their own whether to continue their pregnancy or not. Another bill concerns the further restrictions to barely existing sexuality education in Poland. The signatures in support of this bill were gathered in widely criticised campaign called “Stop Paedophilia” which focused its message on associating sexuality education with paedophilia. This bill proposes amendments to criminal code. It may result in the criminalisation of sexuality educators in Poland and further stigmatise the crumbs of sexuality education in Poland. In practice the bill would stop doctors from prescribing contraceptives for anyone under 18 and would put carers at risk of imprisonment if they talk to youth about sexuality.

Both bills are the effect of mobilisation of the citizens who in the last years actively fight against abortion and sexuality education. They constitute another serious rollback for Polish women and society as regards the respect for fundamental rights of women and access to sexual and productive health and rights.

“I can’t find grounds in the entire legal system to impose such burden on women and to strip women of their autonomy” – says Kamila Ferenc, lawyer at the Federation for Women and Family Planning. “This is a cruel blow for women, given in the worst times ever. We will protest in any possible manner” – adds Krystyna Kacpura, director of the Federation for Women and Family Planning.

PONTON Group of Sex Educators, the biggest and best-known Polish sexuality education organisation associated with Federation for Women and Family Planning, has issued two statements regarding specifically “Stop Paedophilia” bill. One was originally published online for the first parliamentary reading of the ban in [October 2019](#) and second from just few days ago ([April 2020](#)).

Source: [Federation for Women and Family Planning](#), [PONTON Group of Sex Educators](#)

COVID-19 UPDATES

A summary on how COVID-19 affects sexual and reproductive health and rights globally

Laura Hurley, Programme Advisor at [Safe Abortion Action Fund \(SAAF\)](#), authored [an article](#) on how COVID-19 affects access to safe abortion worldwide. It is a great overview of differing contexts and how has the pandemic changed local reproductive landscape. A great tool for advocacy, it is worth to give it a read.

Source: [Medium.com](#), [International Planned Parenthood Federation](#)

Press release by Women on Waves: Make abortion pill more accessible during the time of COVID-19

Women on Waves urge Dutch government for providing access to self-administered medical abortion during COVID-19 pandemic. The press release, issued by WoW, provides examples of women unable to exercise their reproductive rights, as well as quotes a lawyer (Lisa-Marie Komp) and a medical professional and WoW's director (Rebecca Gomperts).

It is worth to notice that one of the tools used for advocacy is a ground breaking [publication](#) on medical abortion by Royal College of Obstetricians & Gynaecologists.

Source: [Women on Waves](#)

FROM ASTRA MEMBERS

Innovations in Social and Labor inclusion for Migrant Women by Gender Alternatives Foundation

The Power Up project aims the social and labor inclusion of women with a migrant background, by means of empowering and upskilling them. It integrates innovative methodologies and approaches, aimed to empower and enhance the competences of women with a migrant background for their self and professional development.

The POWER UP project pursues the following objectives:

- Analyze the social and labour situation of women with a migrant background in their host countries to understand and meet their specific needs and skill gaps and those of the support professionals and volunteers dealing with them.
- Equip professionals and volunteers dealing with women with a migrant background with

practical knowledge and innovative techniques to deliver an empowerment and competency-based intervention.

- Enhance the key social, civic and entrepreneurial competences of women with a migrant background to promote their social and financial independence and their participation in social and civic life.
- Involve male members of the family and community in the empowerment of women with a migrant background.
- Provide with guidelines and recommendations to decision and policy makers to enable the social and labour inclusion of women with a migrant background.

The partnership will develop the following intellectual outputs:

- Power Up E-Learning Hub;
- Power Up Handbook of innovative techniques for professionals working with women with a migrant background;
- Power Up Guidelines and Policy Recommendations.

Follow our [Facebook page](#) for more news and updates on the project!

Four organizations from the EU form the international partnership consortium – Gender Alternatives Foundation (BG), Solidaridad Sin Fronteras (ES), Mindshift (PT) and Matertera (CZ). "Power Up. Empowering and Upskilling women with a migrant background to foster their social and labour inclusion" (2019-1-BG01-KA204-062546), co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European union. The duration of the project is 24 months / 01.10.2019 - 30.09.2021/.

Source: [Gender Alternatives Foundation](#)

Reproductive Health Training Center has started provision of Medical Abortion via Telemedicine service in Moldova

Moldovan NGO, Reproductive Health Training Center has started telemedical consultation around abortion. The initiative was funded to ease access to reproductive services for persons affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and forced self-isolation.

As representatives of Reproductive Health Training Center write themselves:

After women have calculated the gestational age and determined if they have no contraindications to using the method, we counsel women by phone or online and send them MA drugs by mail, or they get access to them in pharmacies. The follow-up happens the same way one week later, by asking specific questions to evaluate the complete abortion and women repeat a pregnancy test 3 weeks

later after this discussion. Thus, we provide access to safe medical abortion in this difficult for them situation, when they cannot travel.

More information is available [online](#) (in Russian and Romanian)

Source: [Reproductive Health Training Center](#)

Sana Sezim provides help to refugees thanks to United Nation's Migration Agency

On March 28, 2020, the first departure of NGO Sana Sezim's staff to the border of Kazakhstan with Uzbekistan ("Zhybek Zholy" checkpoint, former "Chernyayevka") was organized to provide humanitarian assistance to refugees awaiting the possibility of returning to their homeland. This visit was made possible with the support of IOM the UN Migration Agency.

At the time of the provision of humanitarian aid, there were representatives of Consulate General of Uzbekistan in Kazakhstan, law enforcement agencies and Akimat, who assisted the staff of NGO Sana Sezim in distributing personal protective equipment (masks, gloves, antiseptics, antibacterial wipes) for refugees.

It should be noted that due to cooperation with IOM the UN Migration Agency and the Consulate General of the Republic of Uzbekistan more than 600 migrants received humanitarian aid.

A photograph of the report can be found on our [Facebook page](#).

Source: [Sana Sezim](#)

Almost 90% of men and women in Moldova are biased against women

According to UNDP, despite years of efforts in advancing the equality gap between men and women, almost 90 percent of men and women from Moldova hold some sort of bias against women, providing new clues to the invisible barriers women face in achieving equality, and a potential path forward to shattering the Glass Ceiling.

This is one of the main finding behind the new [Gender Social Norms Index](#) released by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) on March 5, 2020. This index measures how social beliefs obstruct gender equality in areas like politics, work, and education, and is constructed based on responses to seven questions from the World Values Survey, which are used to create seven indicators. The Index is available for 75 countries, covering 81 percent of the world's population. In Moldova, according to 2005-2009 data, 90% of men and women note that they have at least one bias against women. 67.2% of population report at least 2 biases, this share being different by gender: 58.6% of women and 76.7% of men. 9.9% of total population say they do not have any biases.

The share of people biased by dimension for Moldova is of:

- 60.3% for **political dimension**: persons thinking that men make better political leaders than women do, or women do not have the same rights as men;
- 58.8% for **economical dimension**: persons thinking that men should have more right to a job than women, or men make better business executive than women do;
- 16.7% for **educational dimension**: persons thinking that university is more important for a man than for a woman;
- 65.2% for **physical integrity dimension**: persons justifying intimate partner violence or limitation of reproductive rights.

For all dimensions, the share of men biased is higher than of women, which points to the fact that men and boys should have a key role to play in challenging discriminatory social norms and must be fully engaged as allies in achieving gender equality.

Unfortunately, the information on how bias is changing in is available for 30 countries, but not for Moldova.

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) recommends to Moldova in its [latest concluding observations released on 2 March 2020](#) the amending of the Law on Ensuring Equality Between Women and Men and/or the Law on Enforcement on Ensuring Equality to include a comprehensive definition of discrimination against women that covers, in addition to direct and indirect discrimination, discrimination in the public and private spheres and intersecting forms of discrimination.

Also, the Committee recommends to Moldova to expedite the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention).

Read more [online](#).

Source: [Family Planning Association of Moldova](#)

RESOURCES

A report on realisation of SDG target 5.6 is out

New data and research was published by the Gender and Human Rights Branch at UNFPA. The publication covers realisation of SDG target 5.6: *Ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights*. The data and research provides the first attempt to track women's decision making

on SRHR and provides the first global assessment of laws and regulations to guarantee access to SRHR.

The publication is available [online](#).

Source: [United Nations Population Fund](#)

UPCOMING EVENTS

A short overview of upcoming United Nation's activities

The impact of COVID-19 measures has resulted in many of the UN meetings scheduled for 2020 being postponed. The Human Rights Council's 43rd session was suspended on 13 March 2020 after completing its third week; before any of the resolutions could be adopted. While some of the Geneva based mechanisms have announced their new dates, others are yet to do so. No formal announcement has been made yet whether the resumed 43rd session and the 44th session (scheduled for 14 June - 03 July 2020) will take place virtually, in person or be postponed. There does seem to be an attempt by the UN to find alternatives to in person meetings, including through using online platforms for virtual meetings.

Aside from the decisions being made by the UN, the Swiss government also has travel restrictions which will probably continue for another few months. This means that entry into Switzerland's is limited to Swiss citizens and individuals with resident permits. Even if the restrictions on the number of people allowed to gather are eased and the UN decides to proceed with in person meetings - such as the Human Rights Council sessions - activists and advocates from other countries will most likely not be able to enter Switzerland to attend these meetings.

Universal Periodic Review

The 36th session of the UPR has been postponed from April 2020 until 2 - 13 November 2020. Belarus and Croatia are up for review during this session. All subsequent sessions will also be postponed, resulting in the final session of the third cycle only taking place in January 2022.

The deadline for the 37th session has been extended until 9th July. Georgia is one of the countries under review during the 37th session.

The adoption of the 35th session UPR outcomes, including for Armenia, should take place during the 44th session of the Human Rights Council.

The Treaty Monitoring Bodies

The United Nations Human Rights Treaties Branch has postponed all upcoming treaty body committee sessions until the end of May in light of the coronavirus outbreak. The Committee Against Torture postponed the 69th Session (20 April - 15 May 2020) to 72nd Session April/May 2021. The 76th session of the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women is scheduled for 20 June to 10 July 2020.

Special Procedures

The mandate holders have issued quite a number of press statements in response to human rights violations occurring as a result of COVID-19 and the measures being put in place by states. The Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences issued a statement endorsed by other Special Procedures highlighting that restrictions on movement can increase incidence of domestic violence and states should include measures to provide women with services. She highlights "It is very likely that rates of widespread domestic violence will increase, as already suggested by initial police and hotline reports. For too many women and children, home can be a place of fear and abuse. That situation worsens considerably in cases of isolation such as the lockdowns imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic"

The Special Rapporteur on the field of cultural rights has called for inputs on her next report to the General Assembly on the issue of cultural rights and climate change. The deadline for submissions is 1 May 2020. The Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences has called for submissions and response to a survey questionnaire for her report to the General Assembly. The submission is for her thematic report on rape as a grave and systematic human rights violation and gender-based violence against women. Deadline for submission is 20 May 2020.

This article was provided by [Sexual Rights Initiative](#)

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; BOCS Foundation; 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; Poland – PONTON Group of Sex Educators; 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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