



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

**No 04 (193) 2020**

### **Table of contents:**

- Burning Issue
- Regional Updates
- From ASTRA members
- Resources
- Upcoming Events

### **BURNING ISSUE**

#### **Polish bans on abortion and sexuality education forwarded to parliamentary committees**

On 16<sup>th</sup> April, Polish Parliament voted on civic draft bills that (if introduced) would effectively ban abortion and criminalize sexuality education. The voting took place amidst COVID-19 outbreak, making it impossible to organize a street protest such as the famous Black Protest of 2016.

Over half of the members of Polish Parliament voted against rejection of both bans. The bills were not rejected, but not introduced either – both documents ended up being forwarded to parliamentary committees for further works. This means that there still is a chance of the bills being

introduced, the decision whether to do so was simply postponed indefinitely. If the bills were to be introduced they would have to be voted upon again by both the lower and higher houses of Parliament.

The votes were disposed unsurprisingly, with the ruling party (Law and Justice), as well as the radical right voting in favour of the bills and centrist liberals and the left opting for dismissal of both projects.

As a reminder – Poland has one of the most strict abortion laws in Europe, allowing for the procedure to be performed only in cases of the pregnancy being a result of a crime, a risk to mother's health or life or when the fetus is malformed. However, women's rights activist in the country have been noting that even when the conditions are met, doctors often deny their patients of service and women and pregnant persons are forced to carry the pregnancy to term.

Sexuality education is currently an extracurricular subject. Proposed ban aims to criminalize teaching comprehensive sexuality education in schools, stop doctors from prescribing contraceptives for anyone under 18 and put carers at risk of imprisonment if they talk to youth about sexuality.

## REGIONAL UPDATES

### **Disturbing news from Hungary: rejected ratification of the Istanbul Convention and discrimination of trans people**

Hungarian Fidesz-led government has rejected the Istanbul Convention. [A statement](#) on the matter was issued by PATENT (ASTRA's member organization) and NANE Women's Rights Association – an excerpt is included below:

*Hungarian victim support organizations PATENT Association and NANE Women's Rights Association were concerned and outraged to learn that on Monday, directly after Mothers' Day, KDNP issued a political statement calling for the rejection of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention). The Convention was signed by Hungary in 2014, but has not been ratified since, despite the fact that the Convention's provisions would be vital for the protection of victims and the prevention of violence.*

*A representative of the governing coalition party (Hajnalka Juhász, KDNP) called on parliamentary groups to join in rejecting the Convention's ratification. Fidesz swiftly assured the Hungarian public that they agree with KDNP's statement, which gained traction with unusual speed at next day's (Tuesday's) parliamentary debate and vote, resulting in a decision against the Convention's ratification.*

*This means that those of us who had been hoping that at one point, the provisions of the Convention for the protection of women would improve the safety of Hungarian women must now part with that notion. If only the governing parties would have reacted so quickly to the fact that the number of domestic violence cases has doubled during the lockdown.*

Except from opting for rejection of the Istanbul Convention, Hungarian government also appears to be planning to make legal gender recognition impossible. The story was described in [The Guardian by Shaun Walker](#):

*Hungary's rightwing government looks likely to push through legislation that will end the legal recognition of trans people by defining gender as "biological sex based on primary sex characteristics and chromosomes" and thus making it impossible for people to legally change their gender.*

*Trans people and rights activists say the law, which has been introduced into parliament as attention is focused on the coronavirus pandemic, will increase discrimination and intolerance towards trans people. Many will try to leave the country, while those who do not have that chance will face daily humiliations.*

(...)

*Legal experts say the new law will be in violation of European human rights case law, leaving it open to challenge in both the Hungarian supreme court and the European court of human rights (ECHR).*

### **Accessing abortion in Moscow presumably practically impossible during COVID-19**

Russian activists attempted to check whether it is possible to have an abortion in Moscow in times of COVID-19. Only 3 out of contacted 44 medical facilities agreed on performing the procedure, even though abortion is included in Russian medical insurance and should be provided for anyone in need.

Local authorities deny that allegation and claim that all Moscow hospitals still perform the procedure, with one exception of a hospital that was transformed into COVID-19 treatment facility.

[Other sources](#) report that abortion was classified as “non-urgent procedure” in a [decree](#) issued by Moscow mayor Sergei Sobianin on 18<sup>th</sup> April.

Source: [Takedela.ru](http://Takedela.ru)

### **Access to safe abortion services is now limited in Moldova owing to COVID-19**

The access to safe abortion services is currently limited because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This way, the crisis situation requires new approaches and the distance services based on modern technologies is one of the opportunities enjoyed by women.

In a response to an inquiry made by IPN News Agency, the Ministry of Health, Labor and Social Protection says the emphasis during the state of emergency will be placed more on the prevention of unwanted pregnancies and also on the prevention of risky abortions by additionally training family doctors.

According to the Ministry, the health facilities provide both medical abortion and vacuum aspiration and the patient can choose between the two after being counseled by a doctor. But now the surgical method is less accessible and the women with unwanted pregnancies use medical abortion, including from a distance, obeying all the diagnostic and conduct provisions.

For women with unwanted pregnancies under nine weeks, the Reproductive Health Training Center recently launched the first service of medical abortion managed from a distance, through telemedicine. The project is supported by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Social Protection, which said that this pilot-project was approved by the National Ethics Committee last November and pursues the goal of ensuring access to safe medical abortion services for socially vulnerable groups, including rural women, teenage girls, etc.

“In the current situation, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, when contacts between patients and medical personnel must be limited so as to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, with the family medicine undertaking to supervise and treat patients remotely, at home, when many of the hospitals cannot provide abortion services, being in quarantine, the offering of this possibility to women for dealing with an unwanted pregnancy is an opportunity,” the Ministry says in its response.

The Ministry noted that the ending of pregnancies by telemedicine, from a distance, is not a violation of the legislation as the Law on Reproductive Health provides that the state will ensure each woman’s access to safe methods of ending a pregnancy, in accordance with the regulations of the Ministry of Health. The safe pregnancy termination standards approved by the Ministry of Health regulate the medical abortion procedure that allows taking medicines at home if this is the patient’s choice.

The Ministry said that a working group was set up this February to review these documents and to align them to the most recent recommendations of the World Health Organization. In the reviewed version, the self-managed medical abortion under the guidance of a distance provider is stipulated, but all the national experts are to pronounce on the issue before the new document is adopted.

Statistics show that 10,830 abortions were performed in 2018. These include abortions on medical and social instructions and spontaneous abortions. As many as 7,132 abortions were performed at request. This is 65.6% of all the abortions recorded in 2018.

Source: [IPN Press Agency](#)

## FROM ASTRA MEMBERS

### **Update from Romania regarding the restrictions of abortion on request in public and private hospital and clinics**

Following our pro-choice group advocacy action toward the Ministry of Health, the MOH Ob-gyn commission sent a circular to all District Health Authorities, recommending to include abortion among the emergency, accompanied by the related methodology, as follows:

Women who seek an abortion procedure on demand, within the legal limit, shall have unrestricted access to specialty consultations and medical assistants.

The procedure shall be conducted only in ambulatory clinics that are separated from hospitals, while observing the established separate access circuits.

The abortion procedure may also be provided via medical abortion, regulated through the Romanian Obstetrics and Gynecology Guidelines under approval by the MOH.

*Update:* Representatives of the Sfântu Gheorghe emergency county hospital, Romania, have announced the opening of the obstetrical – gynecology department as of 1<sup>st</sup> May, and the ambulatory as of 4<sup>th</sup> May. Doctors are to see only emergencies, deliveries, pregnancy supervision and abortion on request.

„As of May 1st we have restarted obstetrical-gynecological care in the hospital (...) As a result of the circular received from the Ministry of Health Ob-Gym Commission that has set the guidelines for

ambulatory medical assistance, irrespective of hospital qualification, namely COVID, COVID support or non-COVID (...).” – hospital manager.

Mention should be made that the MOH circular was sent as a result of the advocacy action conducted by a group of prochoice advocates, including ASTRA Advisory Board member Daniela Draghici.

Source: [AnA Center for Feminist Analysis](#)

### **Stay Safe at home and maintain your Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) initiative by HERA-XXI**

Association HERA-XXI would like to share good practices of the telemedicine on Sexual and Reproductive health counselling and provision of contraception during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Association runs the free online and face to face SRHR counselling and contraception provision for adolescents and most vulnerable groups. During the COVID-19 outbreak lockdowns and crisis, association continued provision of sexual and reproductive health case as an essential healthcare services during the crisis.

From march 2020, doctor conducts face to face counselling by safe and secured online video calls and after counselling most vulnerable groups with identified needs of contraception get the supplies by post-delivery at home.

Main approach of this initiative was to meet needs of beneficiaries and stay with them in this uncertain situation. For now, targeted population are able to stay safe at home and at the same time maintain and fulfil their safe sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Source: [HERA XXI](#)

### **COVID-19 and reproductive rights in Armenia**

This monitoring was carried out from April 10 to May. The purpose of the monitoring is to study the barriers to women's sexual and reproductive health rights in the Republic of Armenia in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This rapid monitoring was carried out by the Network for Reproductive Health and Rights (here in after referred to as the Network), established on the initiative of the Women's Resource Center NGO. The members of the network are human rights advocates for women's reproductive health and rights in various fields and specialists in the relevant field.

Within the framework of the monitoring, telephone interviews were conducted with a total of 25 doctors and nurses from Yerevan, Armavir and Tavush marzes. 12 pharmacies were visited in different communities of Yerevan, calls were made to regional pharmacies to find out the availability of contraceptives. The members of the network also contacted representatives of different groups of women to find out their access to reproductive services, as well as contacted women who have used various reproductive health services during this time.

Summing up the results of our monitoring, we would like to mention detailed information on the reproductive health and reproductive rights issues.

During our monitoring, it became clear that the Ministry of Health had issued an order instructing the management of all gynaecological hospitals and polyclinics to delay or cancel the reproductive health services and interventions that were considered planned. Examples of such interventions include the removal of myomas or cysts, which do not endanger women's health or life.

Acute and emergency cases, bleeding, childbirth, abortion are not considered as planned interventions.

As a result of the monitoring, it became clear that abortion is not considered a planned intervention of the reproductive health services, so with some methodological changes it is provided to women within the allowable time. It should be noted that according to some regions, doctors providing medical abortion rather than surgical which is safer in terms of risk of transmission of the virus, but has time limits and not always is convenient for all women.

It should be noted that most of the 26 doctors said that three days of mandatory waiting period is a big risk and obstacle, as a woman has to enter the hospital twice, which increases the risk in terms of both infection and transmission.

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

### **ACPD's best practices during COVID -19 pandemic**

In a situation where the COVID-19 pandemic crisis has focused attention and work on protecting the population and meeting the requirements of institutions and health care workers to address pandemics, essential reproductive services for women and girls have been significantly curtailed. Restrictions especially on abortion care, post-abortion and contraception, not only have a devastating effect mainly on vulnerable groups, but above all create unnecessary exposure risks to COVID-19.

Albanian Center for Population and Development (ACPD) has adapted the IPPF statement on safe and timely access to abortion care during COVID-19 pandemic and has distributed it to civil society organizations working and supporting women's and girls' reproductive health and rights. 50 Civil Society Organizations have joined this initiative undertaken by the Albanian Center for Population and Development with the aim call on the Government and the Ministry of Health and Social Protection to take urgent steps to ensure access to safe abortion through enabling medical abortion.

Albanian center for Population and Development has also continued online campaigns on social media in order to support all women and girls who seek for sexual and reproductive health services, including abortion and contraception.

Recently, Albanian Center for Population and Development is conducting a study on the situation of Family Planning and Reproductive Health in Albania. This study will serve to gather data on the situation and access to family planning in Albania, as the use of contraception has decreased significantly (from 11% in 2008- 4% in 2018). The final report will be used to do so programmatic interventions in this area. In this context, many stakeholders with a leading role are involved.

Consultative meetings, including meetings with Ministry of Health and Social Protection representatives (MoHSP), are planned by ACPD staff aiming to raise their awareness and encourage them to adopt strategies and interventions for targeted populations regarding family planning, with a focus on access, increase funding for contraception strategy and stabilization of the Sexual reproductive Health (SRH) committee.

Source: Albanian Center for Population and Development

### **First-ever Festival on Sexuality Education in Belarus**

First ever Festival on Sexuality Education in Belarus SEX EDUCATION DAY (18+) happened on 24th of April. That was a one-day on-line festival with educational program covering topics about sex, partner relationships and sexual health with experts invited. YWCA Belarus SRHR Champion Renata Glembotskaya provided a lecture on "Myths about sex". The recording of Festival is available on [YouTube](#) (Belarusian only).

This note is a guest entry by Vera Syrakvash from She Decides

## **RESOURCES**



### **A new report on child marriages in Georgia published by UNFPA**

“This fact sheet provides information about child marriage in Georgia and offers recommendations aimed at addressing the issue. It includes a review of national legislation and the country’s ratification of the various international standards relevant to child marriage, analysis of current practices and attitudes towards child marriage, and statistical information about the prevalence of the practice. The factsheet updates an earlier study published by UNFPA in 2014, which was based on a review of the legal framework and literature related to child marriage in Georgia, and interviews and focus groups with child spouses, community members, and experts. Updates made in 2019 draw on statistical data from the Georgia 2018 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS 2018), and an extensive qualitative study undertaken in 2017.”

The publication is available [online](#).

### **EPF and IPPF EN on SRHR in times of COVID-19**

European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights and International Planned Parenthood Federation’s European Network prepared a joint publication on how COVID-19 is affecting sexual and reproductive health. The document is an overview of current situation regarding SRHR and also contains recommendations to policymakers for bettering access to reproductive care and services.

The report was prepared basing on two surveys conducted between 13 March and 10 April 2020 and can be read [here](#).

## **UPCOMING EVENTS**

*Due to global epidemic of COVID-19, all upcoming events requiring physical interactions have been cancelled or indefinitely postponed. Other events are mostly organised online, usually as webinars.*

### **A webinar on SRHR in COVID-19 era, with ASTRA’s executive director as guest speaker**

ASTRA’s executive director, Krystyna Kacpura, will be a guest speaker during a webinar “Ensuring Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights during COVID-19 and beyond” on Tuesday, 19 May, 6 PM – 7:30 PM CEST. The event is being organized by German MEP’s Terry Reintke and Ulle Schauws and will be held in English.

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; 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

Prepared by Antonina Lewandowska

**ASTRA Secretariat**

Federation for Women and Family Planning  
Nowolipie 13/15, 00-150 Warsaw, Poland  
ph/fax +48 22 635 93 95, [federa@astra.org.pl](mailto:federa@astra.org.pl)  
[www.astra.org.pl](http://www.astra.org.pl)

Follow ASTRA on Facebook and Twitter