



CEE Bulletin on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

No 01 (205) 2022

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BURNING ISSUE

Federa's statement

“Not one more”. One year after the illegitimate Polish abortion ban

One year has passed since the most brutal attack on women’s rights in modern Polish history. A year of pain, terror, and suffering for thousands of women.

From the very announcement of the ruling of the flawed Constitutional Tribunal **the Federation for Women and Family Planning has warned that the ban on abortion would result in the deaths of patients** and, unfortunately, our predictions came true. The information about the death of **Izabela**

from Pszczyna shook the whole country and led hundreds of thousands of people to the streets, with a slogan – Not One More (AniJednejWięcej). Izabela’s face has become a symbol of the fight for the right to abortion in Poland, but she is not the only victim of this bloody law. We know that **Anna from Świdnica** and **Agnieszka from Czestochowa** have also fallen victims of the law – the latter died just two days before the first “anniversary” of the law that most likely contributed to her death. We dread to think of how many women lost their health and lives as a result of this inhuman ban we have not even heard of.

The drama of each of these situations is clearly not understood by most of those who only sit on a parliamentary bench or judge’s chair. They do not hear pregnancy diagnoses, they do not deal with doctors, they are not afraid of sepsis or leaving their children without a care in case of death or illness. Nor do they receive calls from frightened women. In the Federation, during the period from January 2021 to today, our seven-person team has assisted thousands of calls and requests. **Since the entry into force of the ruling, we have been flooded by an uninterrupted stream of requests for support in accessing abortion and also contraception, reliable medical care, and psychological support.**

The politicized Tribunal has caused hell for women in Poland that must end as soon as possible – before another one of us dies. **We demand the immediate decriminalization of abortion, immediate elaboration of transparent hospital procedures, and ensuring that Polish women have access to the full scope of reproductive health services.** Nobody can decide about our health and life except ourselves.

Facing the enormity of suffering and the cruel face of the anti-abortion system, we have created a number of solutions to protect women in Poland – over the past year, **Federa has built a network of supportive psychiatrists who help patients in obtaining documentation necessary to assess the mental health risk of a pregnant woman. Our MPs Rescue Network immediately connects people in need with MPs who offer their support often accompanied by media interest.** We also work with a **group of gynaecologists who stand by the patients and perform abortions without being intimidated by the authorities.** Our afternoon helpline is working at full speed, and the legal team offers training for hospitals and medical staff lost in the current anti-abortion regulations.

Today is a day for us to remember the suffering of women who were harmed by the law of their own country, but also a moment to look to the future. This far-reaching attack on reproductive freedom started a movement that no government can stop, even the most murderous one. More than 100 years ago, Polish women won the electoral rights by force – today we will not rest until what is ours is

rightfully returned to us. Full legality and availability of reproductive rights will become a reality in Poland soon, and until then – the fight continues.

Federa will not leave any woman alone.

Source: [Foundation for Women and Family Planning “Federa”](#)

REGIONAL UPDATES

Prosecutors exhume fetuses after death of woman blamed by family on Poland’s abortion law

Prosecutors investigating the [death of a woman](#) in hospital last month – which her family and activists blame on Poland’s strict abortion law – have exhumed the remains of the twin fetuses she had been carrying and have interviewed her husband and sister.

The death of 37-year-old Agnieszka, a mother of three, has drawn widespread attention and controversy. After one of her fetuses died on 23 December, she was made to carry it for over a week while doctors waited to see what happened to its still-living twin.

When the twin subsequently also died, both fetuses were removed on 31 December. Agnieszka then fell seriously ill – with sepsis, according to her family – and remained in hospital. She died on 25 January, shortly after testing positive for coronavirus.

Her family say that her death was the result of the [near-total ban on abortion](#) introduced last year, and accuse the government of having “blood on its hands”. The hospital says it took “all necessary measures to save the lives of the children and the patient”.

Prosecutors in Częstochowa, where the events took place, immediately opened an investigation into whether the hospital was responsible for her death. The case has now been transferred to the regional prosecutor’s office in Katowice.

“The husband of the deceased woman and her sister have already been questioned and on Thursday the fetuses were exhumed,” prosecutor Agnieszka Wichary told the Polish Press Agency (PAP).

She added that experts from the Department of Forensic Medicine in Szczecin had been appointed to provide an opinion on Agnieszka’s death. Separately, the case is also being investigated by the health ministry’s national consultant for obstetrics and gynaecology and the commissioner for patients’ rights.

Last week, a leading obstetrics doctor, Maciej Socha, told liberal news website OKO.press that, although he is a strong opponent of Poland's abortion law, it had nothing to do with Agnieszka's death. He said that, according to the information available, doctors treating her had acted in a manner justified and consistent with global standards. (...)

"We told you that the constitutional court ruling [introducing a near-total abortion ban] would have a chilling effect," said left-wing MP Marcelina Zawisza, quoted by Gazeta.pl. "You didn't believe us. And now you have the blood of another woman on your hands." (...)

Defenders of the abortion law, however, pointed to the fact that it explicitly allows a pregnancy to be terminated if it threatens the mother's health or life. They also note that, in the case of Iza, an investigation [attributed her death to medical error](#).

Source: [Notes from Poland](#)

Erdogan's Withdrawal from Istanbul Convention 'Illegal', Top Prosecutor Says

Turkish State Council Prosecutor Elmas Mucukgil said on January 20 that President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's withdrawal of Turkey from the "Istanbul Convention", a European treaty on women rights and domestic violence, was illegal.

"The presidential decision on the annulment of the treaty did not comply with the law," Mucukgil said in a court case, the daily [Cumhuriyet](#) reported.

Mucukgil said only parliament could withdraw the country from an international treaty. "The decision should be annulled," Mucukgil added.

The State Council is Turkey's top administrative court and monitors the legality of decisions made by administrative courts. Its decisions must be respected by the government.

State Council Prosecutors can also present their opinions on ongoing important administrative cases.

Its determination on the legality of President Erdogan's withdrawal from the treaty is still ongoing, but experts say the top prosecutor's opinion signals the possible eventual ruling of the State Council.

The Council of Europe's Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence was opened for signatures in May 2011 in Istanbul.

Turkey was the first country to ratify the treaty, but Islamist and conservative critics claimed that it undermined traditional family values, and Erdogan then withdrew his country from the treaty, which came into force on July 1, 2021.

Femicide and violence against women generally remain major problems in Turkey. In the first 20 days of 2022 alone, at least 18 women were killed by men in Turkey. A total of 414 women were recorded as killed by men in 2021 and 411 in 2019.

Turkish police fired tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse women protesters who marched to mark International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women on November 25 last year.

[Repeated calls by the opposition, rights groups and international organisations for Turkey to return to the convention have been dismissed by the government.](#)

Source: [Balkan Insight](#)

Azerbaijan: when families choose boys

(...) In a recent report, "Preventing Son Preference and Undervaluing of Girls in Eastern Europe and Central Asia," UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, suggests that countries in which sex selection exists usually share three characteristics: a strong preference for male children, falling fertility rates and access to modern ultrasound technologies.

Azerbaijan displays all three characteristics.

The case of Azerbaijan

The first factor, son preference, is deeply rooted in local traditions, with sons generally being seen as more valuable than daughters. In a patriarchal country whose citizens are insufficiently protected by social security, sons are a guarantee for ageing parents and earn more to contribute to the family's income. They also handle religious rituals, carry on the family name and inherit land, which is handed down through the male line.

Daughters, on the other hand, are perceived as less valuable. They leave home once they marry and integrate into their husband's family. As a result, a daughter is often considered a burden, since parents may pay a dowry but get little in return.

"Parents are often more willing to have sons than daughters," said Farid Babayev, head of the UNFPA country office in Azerbaijan. "The normal sex ratio at birth is about 106 boys born for every 100 girls, but in Azerbaijan we now have 114 boys for every 100 girls. This is a huge imbalance."

Low fertility is the second factor, and countries with son preference that also experience a fall in fertility, as is Azerbaijan, are hardest hit by this growing disproportion. With fewer children being born, making sure at least one is a boy becomes even more imperative. (...)

Tradition and fertility are not the only drivers of sex selection. Modern technology makes it easier to determine a child's sex – and easier for a parent to choose.

“Ultrasounds and other modern technologies can reveal the gender of an embryo, after which, according to national law, a woman can choose to terminate or go on with the pregnancy,” said Farid Babayev.

Demographic resilience: light at the end of the tunnel

The region's boy-to-girl ratio has long been of concern to UNFPA and is one of the issues being dealt with as part of its [Demographic Resilience Programme](#).

Janoglan Ilyasov runs a state vocational high school and holds training sessions for men, which are run jointly by UNFPA and the National Council of Youth Organizations in Azerbaijan. His mission is to convince the men he meets that having daughters – the eldest of his two children is a girl – is not a misfortune. (...)

“What I try to do is pry minds open by offering food for thought,” Mr. Ilyasov said. “Once they open up to change, the men pause and perhaps rethink and question their own attitudes and behaviours.”

The consequences of sex selection

The consequences of gender-biased sex selection go far beyond upending the ratio of boys to girls. In fact, the practice can have devastating consequences.

Women in societies that prefer sons will often see boys as a guarantee of support for them later in life, and as caretakers of tradition. They may also face external pressure to have male children and if they do not, they may suffer violence from their family or become abandoned. If a woman is pregnant with a girl, she may be forced to have an abortion, or several in a row.

Left unaddressed, this kind of gender imbalance can even lead to increases in human trafficking and early marriages; some men may feel driven to extremes to find a partner in societies where few women are available for marriage. This all emphasizes the low value placed on girls and the many efforts families make to avoid giving birth to daughters. (...)

Progress within reach

(...) In 2017, UNFPA partnered with the European Union to launch the [Global Programme to Prevent Son Preference and Gender-biased Sex Selection](#), first across Asia and then in the Caucasus. Azerbaijan was part of that effort, which helped governments and local groups gather data on son preference and bring this information to the world's attention.

Within the global programme, and as a result of UNFPA's efforts, the government of Azerbaijan adopted a National Action Plan on gender-biased sex selection for 2020-2025. Also, its national development plan, "Concept Azerbaijan 2030", identifies gender equality as a priority. Awareness is growing, and the country has passed major laws and enacted policies enshrining these rights. Internationally, Azerbaijan has signed several agreements guaranteeing the rights of women, demonstrating its willingness to move forward.

UNFPA's role in the region is twofold. On the one hand, it helps shift public policies that discriminate, but it also works to change individual behaviours and practices, through innovative activities ranging from celebrity endorsements and flash mobs to summer camps and workshops. All this is underpinned by a growing body of data that enhances dialogue with decision makers, media, civil society and religious leaders.

Whatever the advances, however, challenges remain. The strands of tradition run deep, laws and policies are not always implemented, institutions still need strengthening and financial insecurity still guides many decisions. (...)

Read the full article: [UNFPA – Eastern Europe and Central Asia](#)

FROM ASTRA MEMBERS

Research and evidence-based advocacy on SRHR issues among displaced women and girls in Armenia

"Exercising the right to reproductive health rights by women and girls displaced to Armenia during and after the Second Artsakh war" study of the response taken by the state, international institutions and non-governmental organizations was implemented by the Women's Resource Center Armenia.

The goal of the study was to examine how the state, international institutions and local non-governmental organizations responded to the reproductive health needs of women and girls displaced during the Second Artsakh war and in its aftermath. The study was based on qualitative inquiries wherein a desk review was conducted to examine existing international standards on ensuring

reproductive health rights to displaced women and girls, and expert and structured interviews were conducted.

The findings of the study showed that both during wartime and in its aftermath, of the sexual and reproductive health rights of women the state prioritized ensuring safeguards for pregnancy and maternity care, while the other issues were not attended to in any special way. In allocating all pregnant women to shelters, attention was paid to the availability of a well-functioning and sanitary washroom and a nearby health clinic. No procedure was set in place to provide information to women on health institutions and procedures on reproductive health services. The referrals were conducted mainly by the persons in charge of shelters. None of the UN bodies interviewed for this study directly participated in providing assistance. The humanitarian assistance was transferred to state agencies and NGOs, which in their turn allocated it to households from Artsakh. Minimum initial service package for SRH in Crisis Situation was not introduced and advocated by the international organizations including UNFPA. Only organizations working on women's rights/feminist and health-related issues targeted issues related to the displaced women's and girls' sexual and reproductive health. The rest of the organizations conducted no assistance other than the primary humanitarian one. Around one year after the end of the war when part of the displaced population returned to Artsakh, the state continues to underperform in its response to the sexual and reproductive health needs of households from Artsakh residing in the territory of Armenia.

Based on reviewed international best practice including the Minimum initial service package for SRH in Crisis Situation a recommendation package was developed targeting 3 main institutions: state authorities, international organizations, and local NGOs.

The research was published in Armenian with English translation of the executive summary. The research is available: <https://bit.ly/3fROeFb>

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

Georgia announces the "National Youth Strategy 2025" and action plan

The project of the National Youth Strategy 2025 and its two-year action plan were prepared in coordination with the [Youth Agency](#). The UN Youth Coordination Group (UNFPA, UNICEF, UNDP, UNIDO, ILO, UNHCR) and the EU-Georgia Education for Employment Program (Skills4Jobs) provided financial and technical support to the project of the National Youth Strategy 2025 and its two-year action plan.

"State Youth Strategy 2025" is a government strategy of Georgia, which aims to ensure the implementation of the strategic priorities set out in the ["Georgian National Youth Policy Concept for 2020-2030"](#) in a coordinated, structured and transparent manner. The following project was developed as a result of participatory processes. Interagency Working Group was established at the first stage of working on the strategy document. This group included Representatives of Georgian ministries and various state agencies. Furthermore, an extensive series of consultations were held with young people, youth organizations, and other stakeholder parties.

The third objective of the 2021-2030 Action Plan of the National Youth Strategy aims to strengthen the health and well-being of young people. The action plan includes the activities related to the sexual and reproductive health of young people to promote a youth-friendly environment and reduce early marriage and sexually transmitted diseases.

The National Youth Strategy 2025 and its two-year action plan have been forwarded to the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth Affairs of Georgia for further response.

Association HERA XXI Facilitates the implementation of the third Objective of National Youth Strategy

The Association HERA XXI as an expert organization was involved in the process of the National Youth Strategy development. Now the association supports the implementation of the strategy and its two-year action plan on the regional level in Georgia. Regarding this, an [advocacy-strategic meeting](#) was held by HERA XXI with the cooperation of the Youth Agency. The local decision makers - representatives of youth structures from ten municipalities developed pathways on implementing third objective of the strategy at the local level while efficiently determining the needs and challenges of young people in their communities and developing local evidence-based action plans.

Strategic Collaboration Between Non-custodial Penalties and Probation National Agency and the Association "HERA XXI"

One of the priority of HERA XXI has been enhancing health and well-being of the most vulnerable youngsters in Georgia and provide youth friendly environment as outlined in National Youth Policy Concept. To contribute juveniles in state care and/or supervision by supporting the rehabilitation and re-socialization process, the Memorandum of Cooperation was signed between Non-custodial Penalties and Probation National Agency and the Association "HERA XXI".

The cooperation serves to facilitate the rehabilitation and resocialization of the Agency's beneficiaries. Especially for the most vulnerable groups, who have less access to the SRHR/SGBV services. The cooperation will support them to take integrated counseling for their better socialization and rehabilitation. The strategic collaboration has two main pillars: first, to provide integrated individual and group SRH/SGBV counseling of beneficiaries of National Referral Center, the second, to build capacities of multidisciplinary team of National Referral Center on the main aspects of the SRH directions, how to develop rehabilitation resocialization individual plans considering psycho-social portraits and SRHR/SGBV related needs of the beneficiaries of the center.

Source for the three previous entries: [HERA XXI](#)

Abortion in Romania - [Jurnalul Decretului](#) now available in English

Abortion on demand was decriminalized in Romania 32 years ago, by decree-law no. 1 of 26 December 1989, the day after dictator Ceausescu was shot dead. At the dawn of modern democratic Romania, this act cancelled a series of laws from the years of communist regime. Among them was decree no. 770 of 1 October 1966, which restricted access to abortion in almost all cases. Now, there is no law prohibiting a woman's right to voluntary termination of pregnancy in state hospitals. However, the refusal of many doctors to provide this service leads, de facto, to a severe restriction of access to abortion on demand in the public health system.

Theoretically, voluntary termination of pregnancy is legal and offered in the public health system in Romania. In practice, doctors in almost a third of public hospitals in the country – whether county, municipal or maternity hospitals – reject requests to perform abortions on demand. If we add medical units that have ceased providing this service during the COVID-19 pandemic, this reaches a total of over 40% of public hospitals that have not performed voluntary abortions since the beginning of 2020.

Read more on decreechronicles.com.

Source: *Daniela Draghici, ASTRA Network Board Member*

About the much disputed concept of "gender" in Romania

Teachers in pre-university education have the power to give girls and boys confidence in their own strengths and can encourage them to participate equally and fairly in all spheres of social, political, professional and domestic life.

Schools also play a key role in combating patriarchal gender roles, gender-based violence and discrimination, and remain the main context for ensuring that the principles of gender equality are passed on to future generations.

To support Romanian teachers in understanding the impact they can have on Shaping an inclusive society and to offer them suggestions for gender mainstreaming in the classroom, the EGALIS project team, the Society for Feminist Analyses is a member of, is preparing a Teachers' Guidebook for Gender Equality in pre-university Education.

Why a teacher's guide?

Education has a major impact on the development of a society based on democratic values and gender equality. Pre-university teachers have the power to give girls and boys confidence in their own strengths and encourage them to participate equally and equitably in all spheres of social, political, professional and domestic life. The school also has a key role in combating patriarchal gender roles, gender-based violence and discrimination, while remaining the main vessel with which the principles of gender equality can be passed on to future generations.

The role of education in this process of social change is significant as studies in Romania show a strong gender gap - according to the latest Gender Equality Index of the EU Institute for Gender Equality, [Romania ranks second to last in the Union European](#) , followed only by Hungary and Greece.

What does the guide contain?

In the first part, the guide includes key notions on gender equality and non-discrimination, including legislation, as well as national and international studies, focusing on gender equality in education.

In the second part, the guide addresses the issue of gender stereotypes, understanding the mechanisms of their functioning, but also methods to fight them.

The third part of the guide includes recommendations for a pedagogical approach in promoting gender equality in different aspects of the educational process: classroom management, interaction with students and parents, review of the school curriculum based on gender equality approach.

The last and most practical section of the guide also contains tools and worksheets to be implemented in the classroom - with a special focus on counselling and class coordination, activities, assessment questionnaires and self-assessment of knowledge and skills in equality.

Who is this guide for?

The guide is primarily addressed to pre-university teachers from all curricular areas interested in incorporating gender equality into their work. At the same time, the guide is a useful tool for the continuous training of teachers, thus addressing methodological training teachers and trainers. Last but not least, the guide can be used by other professionals in education or in youth projects.

[Read more](#). Project funded by Active Citizens Fund – Romania

Source: [ANA Society for Feminist Analysis](#)

RESOURCES

UN Women report: *The impact of COVID-19 on women's and men's lives and livelihoods in Albania. Results of a Rapid Gender Assessment*

In preparation for COVID-19 response, the UN Women Europe and Central Asia Regional Office (ECA RO) under the Women Count Global Program developed and implemented a Rapid Assessment Tool to assess the impact of coronavirus on women and men, including economic hardship, difficulty in livelihood activities and personal vulnerabilities. As such, a Rapid Gender Assessment (RGA) Survey was implemented in Albania by UN Women Albania in partnership with IDRA Research & Consulting. The survey was administered on a national scale between the 17th to 26th of April 2020, with around 1300 persons interviewed using computer assisted telephone interviews (CATI). Key findings of the assessment indicate that:

- *Traditional media was the main source of information regarding COVID-19, with 80% of women and men deeming the information clear and helpful.*
- *Young women faced severe economic hardships, with less than 5% of women and men receiving paid leave.*
- *Both employed and self-employed women faced economic destitution, with more women now working from home and paid fewer hours.*
- *More women are helping their husbands/ partners with domestic household chores and care work.*
- *Women have been hard hit by a loss of income from livelihood resources.*
- *A considerable proportion of women faced psychological and mental health issues as a result of the uncertainty created by the pandemic.*

- *More women than men expressed fear that they would not be able to buy food or pay for basic expenses including rent and utilities.*

Source: [UN Women](#) report

UPCOMING EVENTS

49th regular session of the Human Rights Council – 28 February – 1 April

New session of the Human Rights Council is set to start later this month. Planned plenary discussions this time include:

- Annual high-level panel discussion on human rights mainstreaming
Theme: The contribution of universal participation to the mainstreaming of human rights throughout the United Nations system on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Voluntary Technical Assistance Trust Fund to Support the Participation of Least Developed Countries and Small Island Developing States in the Work of the Human Rights Council
- Meeting on enhancing technical cooperation and capacity-building in promoting and protecting the human rights of persons in vulnerable and marginalized situations in recovery efforts during and after the COVID-19 pandemic
- Annual full-day meeting on the rights of the child
Theme: The rights of the child and family reunification
- Panel discussion on ensuring equitable, affordable, timely and universal access for all countries to vaccines in response to the COVID-19 pandemic
- Annual interactive debate on the rights of persons with disabilities
Theme: Statistics and data collection under article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
- Panel discussion on the importance of robust public policies and services for the protection of economic, social and cultural rights in contributing to the COVID-19 pandemic recovery
- Debate in commemoration of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

Full agenda can be accessed on HRC's [website](#).

ASTRA Network Members: Albania - Albanian Center for Population Development; 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 – PaRiter; 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"; Latvia - Association for Family Planning And Sexual Health "Papardes Zieds"; Lithuania - Family Planning and Sexual Health Association; Moldova – Family Planning Association; Moldova - Reproductive Health Training Center; North Macedonia - Association for emancipation, solidarity and equality of women; North Macedonia – H.E.R.A.; North Macedonia – Shelter Center; Poland - Federation for Women and Family Planning; Ponton Group of Sex Educators; Romania - A.L.E.G.; Romania – AnA – Society for Feminist Analyses; Romania - Euroregional Center for Public Initiatives; Romania - The East European Institute of Reproductive Health; Romania – SEXUL vs BARZA/SEX vs THE STORK; Russia - Novogorod Gender Center; Russia – Russian Association for Population and Development; Slovakia – Moznost Volby; Tajikistan – Gender and Development; Ukraine - Women Health and Family Planning; Ukraine - SALUS Charitable Foundation; Uzbekistan - Future Generation

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