



CEE Bulletin on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

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BURNING ISSUE

ASTRA NETWORK ACTIVITIES IN THE YEAR OF THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE

2022 marked the beginning of the first European war on an international, maybe even global scale. It severely impacts current developments around the world, especially in Central and Eastern Europe. A need for basic humanitarian care, unseen for decades in our part of the world, took the work of regional NGOs to extremes. All in order to help as many as possible.

As a Network of non-governmental organisations based in different countries of CEE, ASTRA became one of the main contact points for a number of foreign and international organisations wishing to support Ukraine. Thanks to the close ties of ASTRA with representatives of other networks, such as the

Romanian Anti-Human Trafficking Network, ASTRA's secretariat operated as a hub connecting different partners according to the current needs of the first responders working on the borders of Ukraine and its neighbouring countries.

Such strengthening of international relations opened the doors to new cooperations for the Network. ASTRA is now working with Care International or Voice Amplified, a project was also started with our friends at Fòs Feminista. The new partners have offered ASTRA's members support to be provided in a number of ways, including digital security trainings or hosting of anti-burnout workshops for the first responders. The Network also works with long-time partners, Global Fund for Women and the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.

ASTRA's secretariat was (and still is) in touch with representatives of 20 countries of the region, which allowed the Network to quickly report about the war situation on the ground. The requests of the first responders were quickly forwarded to the international community, allowing for a swift response and an (at least temporary) meeting of the needs. That applies especially, although not only, to ASTRA's Ukrainian members: Salus Charitable Foundation from Lviv and Women's Health and Family Planning Foundation based in Kyiv.

For ASTRA Network, the war in Ukraine, however, does not come down to international advocacy only. Members of the Network have been provided with a platform for a swift exchange of good practices and experiences in providing support for those affected by the war. They have the possibility to share resources and grow together as first responders and members of the Network.

ASTRA Network remains a safe space for women's rights defenders, and at the same time ensures visibility and conveys the messages and needs of the grassroots organisations of Central and Eastern Europe – even, or maybe especially, during the war.

REGIONAL UPDATES

Disabled 24-year-old* rape victim refused abortion in Poland by hospitals in her province

A 24-year-old disabled woman* [correction by ASTRA Network] who became pregnant as a result of rape was refused an abortion by hospitals in her province, forcing her to travel across the country to the capital, Warsaw, to obtain a termination.

While doctors in Poland are allowed to refuse to perform an abortion under a so-called “conscience clause”, hospitals are required to inform patients where they can obtain a legal termination. In this case, it appears that did not happen.

A health ministry spokesman has confirmed that local hospitals failed to comply with the rules. The commissioner for patients’ rights has ordered an investigation. Opposition politicians, however, say that the incident is an example of the consequences of Poland’s strict abortion law, which is supported by the government.

The case was first reported on Friday by Federa, an NGO that supports women’s sexual and reproductive rights. It revealed that the 14-year-old, who has intellectual disabilities, was raped by her uncle.

The crime only came to light when she became pregnant, after which it was reported to prosecutors. While Poland introduced a [near-total ban on abortion in 2021](#), rape and incest are still one of the two circumstances in which abortion is allowed (the other being a threat to the mother’s health or life).

However, when the girl’s aunt tried to help obtain an abortion in Podlasie, the northeastern province where they live, local hospitals refused to provide it, citing the conscience clause.

Moreover, they did not provide information about doctors who could terminate the pregnancy. That led the aunt to contact Federa, which arranged for the girl to obtain an abortion in Warsaw.

Health ministry spokesman Wojciech Andrusiewicz yesterday confirmed that the hospitals “acted against statutory provisions” in this case. “Such an abortion [should] either be carried out or [they should] indicate a place where such an abortion can be carried out,” he told broadcaster TVN.

Paweł Grzesiewski, spokesman for the commissioner for patients’ rights, also told TVN that, while individual doctors can invoke the conscience clause, whole hospitals cannot. His office has ordered an inspection to take place. (...)

** It has subsequently emerged that the victim who was reportedly refused an abortion was 24 years old, not 14 [as previously reported].*

Source: Daniel Tilles, [Notes from Poland](#)

‘Simpler and safer’: Medical abortion becomes legal in Lithuania

Medical abortion becomes legal in Lithuania as of January. Women wishing to terminate pregnancy medically will be able to do so until the ninth week of pregnancy.

Those opting for medical abortion will first need to consult with an obstetrician-gynaecologist.

“First, the doctor must provide all the information related to the procedure. If the patient decides to terminate the pregnancy medically, the doctor prescribes a prescription medicine,” Inga Cechanovičienė, a spokesperson for the Health Ministry, told LRT TV.

Medications for medical abortion have already been registered in Lithuania and will be available in pharmacies with a doctor’s prescription. According to the Health Ministry, these medicines are included in the list of essential medications by the World Health Organisation. (...)

According to the doctors, women in Lithuania have long been enquiring about the possibility of a medical abortion because they knew it was available in many European countries.

“Women may have been obtaining these drugs illegally, but it was dangerous. Now, if it’s a legal method, it’s also safe,” said gynaecologist Esmeralda Kuliešytė. (...)

Source: Goda Malinauskaitė, [Lithuanian National Radio and Television](#)

Fourth and fifth hearings in the case of woman human rights defender Justyna Wydrzyńska

On 6 February 2023, the fifth hearing in Justyna Wydrzyńska’s case took place, where the woman who received the abortion pills gave her testimony. The court closed the hearing to the public for the duration of the examination of two witnesses, including the woman who took pills from Justyna Wydrzyńska. The interrogations lasted approximately 2.5 hours and the hearing ended without a verdict, as an individual fainted during the hearing and the case had to be adjourned. The next hearing is scheduled for 14 March 2023, where a final verdict is expected.

At the beginning of the fifth hearing, a motion was filed by Justyna Wydrzyńska's lawyer to exclude the ultra-conservative anti-choice catholic organisation, Ordo Iuris, as *amicus curiae* from the case, alleging that the organisation unlawfully disclosed the data of the woman who took the pills from Justyna Wydrzyńska. A representative of Ordo Iuris argued that the social media post did not reveal the woman’s data, and if the post with her name appeared for a moment on the publication, it was a mistake of an employee of the organisation. The court did not accept the motion by Justyna Wydrzyńska's lawyer, and Ordo Iuris remained as *amicus curiae* in the hearing.

A new evidence request to include the organisation Abortion Dream Team’s media interviews was also submitted by the prosecutor's office, which the organisation only discovered on the morning of the fifth hearing. Such evidence should not be introduced into the case, as it is a violation of the judicial procedure.

On 11 January 2023, the fourth hearing in the trial of Justyna Wydrzyńska took place in Warszawa-Praga District Court. The woman human rights defender is being accused of assisting in an abortion and faces three years in prison. This is the first such case in Poland where a human rights defender has been accused of assisting with an abortion. The witness and partner of the woman who received the pills, who reported the transferral of the pills to the police, appeared at the fourth hearing to give his testimony.

Source: [Front Line Defenders](#)

Bulgarian Supreme Court Rules Against Transgender People's Rights

Citing the Bulgarian constitution's view that sex is only biological, transgender people will no longer be eligible to change their documents in accordance with their identity, the Supreme Court ruled.

Rights activists predicted more cases being brought against Bulgaria at the European Court of Human Rights after the Supreme Court of Cassation in Sofia ruled on Monday that transgender people will no longer be eligible to change documents in accordance with their identity.

"The constitution and Bulgarian legislation are built on the understanding of the binary existence of the human species," the ruling said.

Twenty-eight judges voted in favour, but 21 expressed dissenting opinions. According to legal news website lex.bg, it was a rare case of an issue dividing the court so starkly.

The dissenting judges' opinion said that the court's decision imposed "a general, automatic and unified ban on legal gender change".

They argued that "a legal change of gender is not in contradiction with the 'binary existence of the human species', because it does not refer to a 'third gender'". (...)

[T]he court's decision came after a ruling by the Constitutional Court in 2021 that deemed the Istanbul Convention, a Council of Europe human rights intended to combat violence against women and domestic violence, as anti-constitutional for similar reasons. (...)

Source: Svetoslav Todorov, [Balkan Insight](#)

FROM ASTRA MEMBERS

Joint initiative addressing SRHR needs of women and girls fleeing the war in Ukraine

Following the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, millions of people, particularly women and children fled Ukraine and crossed the borders of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, other EU member states and Moldova. Thousands of them needed sexual and reproductive health and gender based violence support services, and thousands more may need these services in the future.

Since June 2022, led by the Center for Reproductive Rights, [FEDERA](#) and [Feminoteka](#) are the two organisations from Poland that together with other organisations from countries bordering Ukraine have been working together on a project to document the experiences of adult refugee women from Ukraine who needed access to sexual and reproductive health and gender-based violence support services. We have been collecting information on the experience as regards sexual and reproductive health and gender based violence needs of adult refugee women and the barriers they may face in accessing services.

In addition, the initiative documents the needs of and threats faced by women's rights and sexual and reproductive rights defenders and civil society organizations providing assistance to those affected by the conflict. One of its aims is to inform the immediate, urgent humanitarian and refugee response of multiple stakeholders and shape medium and long-term sustainable strategies.

Read more about the initiative on the [Center for Reproductive Rights website](#).

Source: [Foundation for Women and Family Planning FEDERA](#)

Tackling sexual harassment at the workplace in Armenia through improving legislation

In March 2022, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs published a package of major amendments to the Labour Code for public discussion. Regulations on workplace sexual harassment were not included in this draft despite the fact that this issue was raised by international human rights bodies several times (CEDAW, ILO). In the scope of the development of a gender-sensitive response to women's labour rights in Armenia through improving legislation and practice, a legislative amendments package was prepared by the Women's Resource Centre (WRCA) advocacy team. Additionally, from June to July the WRCA conducted an online survey on sexual harassment at the workplace in order to gather initial data on how widespread the issue was in Armenia.

We have had 592 respondents 43% of whom report having been subjected to sexual harassment at the workplace. Most of the respondents were women ages 16-39. We have asked the respondents to also specify the type of work they did, whether they were registered workers, employment type, etc. Thus far we have found that sexual harassment is more widespread in the service sector at 33%; among registered workers as well as unregistered workers. Additionally, most respondents reveal that sexual harassment against them was done by company heads which obviously makes it even harder to talk about. Furthermore, more than 60% of respondents reveal that they had to quit their jobs as a result of harassment which poses a significant threat to workers' rights. Also considering sexual harassment is often a form of gender-based discrimination this makes sexual harassment at the workplace one of the great obstacles for women to realize their right to dignified work in Armenia. For more information about the survey, you can visit <https://womenofarmenia.org/hy/publications/>. The survey is in Armenian.

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

Sarajevo Open Center's new programme targets anti-choice propaganda

Sarajevo Open Centre started implementing a project that will deal more deeply and comprehensively with abortion as a matter of reproductive health and rights, as we observe more and more conservative influence on policies, and we have planned several activities, such as:

research on the regulation, availability, access, and practice of abortion in Bosnia and Herzegovina

- creation of partnerships/collaborations with feminist movements, organizations, initiatives, and individuals, in order to act proactively in the public space to define problems and methods of struggle, but also to create a platform for better advocacy for change;
- meetings with institutions in the field of healthcare, which we will also cover with research, in order to contribute to a better understanding of abortion as a human right and part of the basic package of health services;
- media campaigns after we complete the research and receive the findings;
- research/mapping of anti-abortion (pro-life) groups, media, and experts in cooperation with fact-checking and similar media;
- networking with regional feminist activists who have experience fighting for adequate access to abortion.

So far, we have taken the first steps in researching the availability of abortion, and we are currently mapping local groups we could partner with, that also advocates the improvement of sexual and reproductive health.

Source: [Sarajevo Open Center](#)

RHTC of Moldova conducted the round table discussion on formative research results to assess the feasibility of extending the MA via telemedicine service in Kyrgyzstan

The Reproductive Health Training Center of Moldova (RHTC) continues the project OPTions Initiative - Setting the stage for regional scaling up of Medical Abortion via Telemedicine in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

The main goal of the project is to effectuate formative research and to assess the feasibility of expanding the telemedicine MA service offered in Moldova to five other countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan and to facilitate the implementation of telemedicine MA service in one of the five target countries.

On December 13, in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, RHTC, in partnership with the MoH of Kyrgyzstan and Kyrgyz Alliance for Family Planning (KFPA), organized the roundtable discussion, the topic was: "Raising understanding and knowledge about WHO recommendations on safe abortion and family planning through telemedicine in Kyrgyzstan". The event was attended by 40 offline participants and over 50 online participants: reproductive health service providers, policy-makers, pharmacists, etc.

The representative of the Ministry of Health presented the current landscape of reproductive health in Kyrgyzstan, including achievements, problems, and solutions.

Dr. Baktygul Bozgorpoeva, Director of KFPA, presented the data obtained from the effectuated formative research, regarding the feasibility assessment of the introduction of medical abortion through telemedicine. The online survey was conducted among women's groups (NGOs), abortion drug distributors, policymakers, pharmacists, service providers, and potential service recipients.

The results of the survey in Kyrgyzstan have shown a positive attitude towards telemedicine; more than 80% of the interviewed people think that MA via telemedicine has advantages and should be available.

During the discussions, most of the speakers expressed a very positive attitude toward the option of using Telemedicine for AM and proposed concrete steps towards its implementation, which were included in a national work plan.

The formative research on barriers regarding medical abortion in the region will be followed by piloting a medical abortion through telemedicine service delivery model in an EECA country.

Source: [Reproductive Health Training Center](#)

The Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan is planning to adopt the law "On Combating Human Trafficking in the Republic of Kazakhstan" in 2023

Today, with the cooperation of the Government, law enforcement agencies, and civil society, a lot of joint work on combating trafficking in human beings is carried out. An interdepartmental working group is set up under the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which includes representatives of government and law enforcement agencies, as well as civil society (director of the NGO "Sana Sezim" Shakhnoza Khassanova is included also) to develop new national legislation to combat human trafficking. The main purpose of this draft law is to regulate social relations in the sphere of combating human trafficking and aims to implement government policy in the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Significant attention is given to the protection of vulnerable groups. It is important to mention that one chapter is dedicated to the protection of children, prevention of trafficking in persons among children, and return of foreign children victims. Despite children, the legislation underlines the vulnerability of women.

Currently the legislation is on the stage of discussion by general population. The draft law is uploaded to the special website of Open Regulatory Legal Acts, where citizens and permanent residents are discussing and leaving their opinions on the legislation. As such, the population of Kazakhstan believes that legislation will be an effective tool to combat trafficking in persons and the drafters of the legislation believe that the legislation will implement the international "4P" paradigm, which is Prevention, Protection, Prosecution, and Partnership, used in the combatting trafficking in persons.

Source: [Sana Sezim](#)

"Attack on Women, Abortion Services and Democracy" – Documentary Movie

The investigative-documentary film "Attack on Women, Abortion Services and Democracy" was released by the Association HERA XXI. The film aims to investigate what causes the barriers and stigma to legal abortion - the realization of women's right to health in Georgia, and also analyses how the issue of abortion becomes a tool of political manipulation to attack democracy and women's

rights. The film examines the influence of systemic barriers and societal stigmas on women's right to choose, and the backlash against women's rights. The causes of the issue are seen and discussed from different points of view, including the double standards of the health care system and clinics; the Narrative of public stigmas, radical/conservative groups, and political decision-makers as an influence on public opinion.

Release year: 2022

The movie is available online [here](#) and [here](#).

Source: [HERA XXI](#)

RESOURCES

Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters Podcast

The SRHM Podcast explores new research and emerging trends in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters or SRHM promotes sexual and reproductive health and rights globally. At the heart of SRHM is a multidisciplinary, open-access, peer-reviewed journal. SRHM also creates and participates in spaces that motivate improvements in research, policy, services and practice. It contributes to capacity building in knowledge generation.

In this episode, Sara Gullo, Christine Galavotti and Feven Mekuria discuss reproductive power and aligning actions with values in global family planning. This episode was recorded and released in anticipation of the International Conference on Family Planning 2022. The podcast is available on all major channels including [Apple Podcast](#) and [Spotify](#).

Source: [Sexual and Reproductive Rights Matter Journal](#)

UPCOMING EVENTS

March 6-17, 67th United Nation's Commission on the Status of Women

The sixty-seventh session of the [Commission on the Status of Women](#) will take place from 6 to 17 March 2023.

Representatives of [Member States](#), UN entities, and [ECOSOC-accredited non-governmental organizations \(NGOs\)](#) from all regions of the world are invited to contribute to the session.

Themes

- **Priority theme:** Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls
- **Review theme:** Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls ([agreed conclusions](#) of the sixty-second session)

Source: [UN Women](#)

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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