



CEE Bulletin on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

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BURNING ISSUE

Polish parliamentary elections outcome spark “cautious hope” in the women’s rights movement

Below, we present an official statement from our Polish member, Foundation for Women and Family Planning, FEDERA:

In Poland, 15th October 2023 will be remembered as a day on which history was made. An astonishing 74% turnout, with record-high women’s participation (over 73% according to exit polls), makes this year’s parliamentary elections the biggest in terms of the number of voters in modern Polish history. The turnout exceeds even the first partially free elections that led to the abolition of the communist regime back in 1989 – and does so by a whopping 12%. Young women are

likely to thank for that result, as the estimated turnout among women of 18-25 years old (known as supporters of the Left and the democratic opposition) largely exceeded expectations.

The elections were most likely won by the currently ruling Law and Justice party (PiS), with an estimated support of 34-37% of the voters. However, it is almost certain that despite the win PiS will not manage to form a new government, therefore leaving the possibility to formulate a cabinet to the opposition which – according to the exit poll – does have a parliamentary majority.

We expect PiS to attempt to hold on to power as long as they can by using all solutions available, which could delay the establishment of a new government even up to January. That scenario was already announced by Jarosław Kaczyński, leader of PiS, who declared upon hearing the first exit poll results: *We are facing days of battle, days of various tensions (...). Interesting days are ahead of us.*

The opposition-led government would almost certainly be formed by three electoral committees – The Civic Coalition led by Donald Tusk, The Third Way (a new coalition of two leading Christian Democratic parties), and The New Left.

Official results of the elections are expected to be announced on Tuesday, 17th October.

What does that mean for women's rights in the country?

Firstly, the legal situation will not change anytime soon. Poles are still living under an extreme abortion ban, their lives often in danger in medical facilities.

FEDERA's activities and goals remain the same for the upcoming months. We will keep on providing support to persons in need of an abortion or access to contraceptives.

As per advocacy endeavours, immediate decriminalisation of abortion is an absolute priority. Abolishment of possible criminal responsibility for providing an abortion is the only way to save lives and protect women living in Poland. FEDERA will actively push for changes to be introduced in the Penal Code, so that no medical professional can call on the fear of criminal responsibility for saving lives.

Additionally, FEDERA's team is working on a package of draft bills and legal solutions that would drastically improve the accessibility of sexual and reproductive services in the country. The documents will be officially forwarded to decision-makers in the elected government in the first

weeks of the new term. Our team is also ready to join ministerial expert teams working to develop systemic solutions to the crisis of sexual and reproductive care accessibility in Poland.

However, it needs to be noted that with all the damage done to Poland in the past 8 years, the new democratic government will have a number of matters to attend to. Between the judiciary crisis, illegal cutdown of national forests, severe abuse of the Constitution, and rumoured plans to put most notable PiS politicians before the State Tribunal, women's rights may easily be forgotten or left behind. Women's rights protectors, including FEDERA, will therefore need to stay vigilant and monitor the situation.

REGIONAL UPDATES

Budapest Demographic Summit champions 'traditional family values'

Speaking at the bi-annual Budapest Demographic Summit, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban stressed the importance of "family-friendly, conservative powers" in Europe.

Hungary is a strong bastion of support for families in the world, Viktor Orbán said on the opening day of the 5th Budapest Demographic Summit on Thursday.

The Prime Minister also said that Europe is still led by a progressive and liberal elite, while demographic issues, for example, are not being discussed instead of the continent's important issues.

Orban stressed that Hungary is an incubator for conservative policies, a place where the conservative policies of the future, workable solutions, and forward-looking initiatives are being developed.

Since taking power in 2010, Orban has styled himself as an "illiberal" defender of Christianity and "pro-family" values in the central European country of 9.7 million.

"We need a change in the political course. We have to make sure that family-friendly, conservative powers take over in as many European countries as possible," Orban told the conference.

A subsidised housing scheme for young married couples was introduced in 2015, while policies announced in 2019 include lifelong tax exemption for women who bear four or more children.

Drawing interest from conservative and far-right politicians and prominent figures, such as US tech billionaire Elon Musk, critics say however, the policies have fuelled inequality and discrimination.

Arguing the policies' success, Hungary's government points to a marriage rate that has doubled from 3.6 marriages per 1,000 persons in 2011 to 7.4 in 2021, far above the EU average of 3.9 that year. (...)

The article was published on 16th September by [Euronews.com](https://www.euronews.com)

Police intervention in the Polish case of Joana who took abortion pills

This case constitutes yet another episode of Poland's anti-abortion obsession as innocent women fell victim to the criminalisation of abortion in Poland.

The story was made public by [Fakty TVN](https://www.fakty.tvn.pl) on 18th July 2023. In April of this year Joanna took an abortion pill. She was not feeling well so she called her psychiatrist and told about her abortion. The doctor then called the police without informing Joanna of doing so. Joanna was found at her home and escorted to the hospital for a gynecological examination by several policemen who surrounded her. She was ordered to undress, do squats and cough even though she was still bleeding. They also seized the woman's computer and phone.

The police have argued that their intervention was necessary to check whether someone had assisted the woman in terminating her pregnancy, which is an act punishable by up to three years in prison under Article 152 § 2 of the Polish criminal code. Joanna emphasized that no one helped her to terminate the pregnancy and that it had been her decision. The prosecutors confirmed that an investigation is underway into the crimes of aiding or soliciting suicide and assisting a woman in terminating her pregnancy.

FEDERA lawyer Kamila Ferenc is Joanna's legal representative and she filed a complaint to the court against the seizure of Joanna's belongings. FEDERA will provide Joanna with the necessary legal support including but not limited to the compensation claim. The Ombudsman for Patient's Rights and Ombudsman for Human Rights have already initiated the proceedings into this case.

FEDERA is monitoring the situation and will assist Joanna with anything she might need to prove her innocence and substantiate the abuse of powers by public officers in her case. Please follow [FEDERA'S Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/FEDERA.pl) Page for the most recent posts and updates on Joanna's story.

Deleting abortion from the criminal code should be an imperative for all reasonable policy makers. The extent of harm caused by criminalisation of abortion calls for immediate legal change. This story should have never happened.

Marches of solidarity with Joanna and against police oppression are taking place in front of police headquarters on 25 July 2023 in Cracow, Warsaw and other cities. The map of protests is [here](#).

Ola and the criminal investigation into her miscarriage

On 26 July 2023 Wysokie Obcasy published an [article on Ola](#), another victim of anti-abortion obsession and institutional violence against women in need of reproductive care in Poland.

Ola's case goes back to 2022. Before giving birth to her son in 2019, Ola's attempts to get pregnant were marked by miscarriages due to her gynecological condition. In 2022, she became pregnant again and this was a planned pregnancy. In the 18th week of pregnancy, she began to feel unwell, experiencing severe cramps and fever. She had a miscarriage at home and the ambulance transported her to the hospital for a medical checkup.

Immediately after, the police came to Ola's house and to the hospital as well. Although the woman was very weak, the policemen insisted on entering the room and questioning her. The officers followed her every step. Blood was taken from her test following the police's prescription.

As she was leaving the hospital, the policeman asked if she had flushed the toilet. "Before I managed to get home, I found out that the policemen were already waiting in my house, because the prosecutor ordered the septic tank to be pumped out" – said Ola to [Wysokie Obcasy](#). The septic tank was pumped out with the purpose to look for the remnants of the fetus allegedly flushed to the toilet.

The District Prosecutor in Warsaw initiated proceedings for assistance in abortion. In October 2022, after almost half a year the proceedings were discontinued. " – I haven't committed any crime. It was a miscarriage, a tragedy for me, and I was treated, at the prosecutor's request, like garbage – said Ola.

Ola decided to share her story with FEDERA, encouraged by [Joanna's testimony](#) in the case of the police intervention which followed after Joanna took an abortion pill. FEDERA lawyer is representing Ola and is currently collecting evidence to ensure adequate legal actions is taken in her case.

Source for the two previous entries: [Foundation for Women and Family Planning FEDERA](#)

FROM ASTRA MEMBERS

The Nagorno Karabakh humanitarian catastrophe and sexual and reproductive rights of displaced women

On September 19, 2023, Azerbaijan launched a large-scale military offensive against Nagorno-Karabakh. As a result of operation around 100,000 population of Nagorno Karabakh were forced to leave their houses and move to Armenia.

Since 24 September 2023, the Government of Armenia reported the arrival of 106.321 new refugees. The proportions were relatively consistent across sex and gender, with the exception of women aged 65 and older, who arrived in higher numbers.

The 10-month blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh by Azerbaijan posed a significant challenge to women's rights, specifically their sexual and reproductive rights. The military operation on September 19, which resulted in numerous civilian injuries only intensified this crisis. In this situation, giving birth was particularly challenging for women due to the lack of electricity, limited access to medical supplies, and hospitals overwhelmed with wounded individuals. Many individuals have endured days of waiting in line to leave Nagorno-Karabakh, as the sole route to Armenia became congested with vehicles, resulting in a significant traffic jam on the winding mountain road. It was especially tough for women who had lost their husbands to arrange the move for themselves and their kids.

The last groups of displaced individuals comprised not only single/widowed women but also residents from care facilities for the elderly and disabled. A birth also occurred during the journey to Armenia, and it was welcomed and supported by the people in the nearby crowded vehicles on 26 September.

During these days, many women's needs, including those related to sexual and reproductive health, went unattended during the long traffic jams. Throughout the arduous 40-plus-hour journey, in overcrowded vehicles, discussions about menstrual hygiene, access to menstrual pads, and the healthcare requirements of pregnant women were notably absent, as everyone's primary focus was solely on reaching Armenia.

Currently, when more than 100,000 displaced people have arrived in Armenia, half of whom are women and girls, their sexual and reproductive needs are still not being addressed, including those women who live in state-provided shelters. And although the state provides this group with all the rights enjoyed by Armenian citizens, it is obvious that the women of this group need a more comprehensive and sensitive response to their reproductive needs.

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

Sarajevo Open Centre publishes a new report on SRHR in Bosnia and Herzegovina

As Sarajevo Open Centre, working on women's rights and gender equality, strives to create a robust basis for an evidence-based approach and full availability and accessibility of abortion services in all parts of BiH, with this research we continue the annual monitoring of the state of women's rights,

including sexual and reproductive health. The research was conducted among competent health institutions in BiH, public and private healthcare facilities (clinical centres/clinics, hospitals, medical offices), i.e., among health and medical experts who develop and implement relevant policies and regulations, and who perform abortions – termination of pregnancy, to obtain a clear overview of the existing regulation and medical practices.

The goal of the research is to establish an informed cooperation with leading health institutions and facilities – clinical centres, hospitals and their specialists, to share information and raise awareness and sensitivity to the problems of limited availability of abortion health services, as well as to contribute to the understanding of abortion as a woman’s human right and basic health care. Furthermore, the research can and should serve those who make decisions, laws and policies pertaining to access to health care and sexual and reproductive rights. The ultimate goal is to influence a broader understanding of abortion as a human right of women and basic health care for it to be made available to all persons who need it.

Sarajevo Open Centre is working on a campaign to present the results and recommendations of the research, and developing a policy paper to improve the current situation in BiH.

The report is available [online](#).

Source: [Sarajevo Open Center](#)

The second training of providers on Pilot-study on Medical Abortion via Telemedicine, conducted by RHTC in Tiraspol, Transnistria, a post-conflict area of Moldova

On October 12, 2023, the Reproductive Health Training Center (RHTC) orchestrated and actively participated in a modest yet impactful dissemination and training workshop in Tiraspol.

Building upon the success of the ongoing pilot study initiated in June 2023, the decision was made to expand the participant capacity. This determination stemmed from several key factors:

1. Enrollment Velocity:

The members of the working group demonstrated a remarkable grasp of the process and readily adopted the innovative patient-provider interaction method. This departure from the conventional involvement in every standard patient-provider interaction step was noteworthy.

2. Process Simplicity:

The ease with which medical abortion was offered through telemedicine was impressive. The providers involved in the study were amazed of how many of the steps in this type of patient/provider interaction they were already using for a long time.

3. Trust in Participants:

Women participating in the study showcased a commendable understanding of their health and requirements. They took pride in being decision-makers in the critical choice of opting for medical abortion via telemedicine. Their empowerment and confidence in managing their health were truly inspiring, despite lacking medical expertise.

4. Interest from Other Cities:

Encouraged by the initial success, three additional medical institutions from three regions in Transnistria expressed interest in joining the study and requested inclusion.

In light of the aforementioned factors, RHTC, in collaboration with Dr Oxana Ceban from the Reproductive Health Center in Tiraspol, resolved to extend the pilot study in terms of duration and participant numbers, encompassing both providers and beneficiaries.

The gathering saw participation from a total of 17 individuals, including members of the local Medical Authority, pilot study doctors, data management staff aiding in data analysis, and six new members of the pilot study from Rabnita, Bender, and Grigoriopol.

Dr. Rodica Comendant, Director of the RHTC, commenced the event by providing insights into Moldova's experience with the new method's introduction. She highlighted how the challenges posed by Covid-19 facilitated the acceptance of this method as a norm, fostering self-confidence among the beneficiaries. Dr. Comendant also expressed her delight at the positive response to the pilot study in Tiraspol.

Oxana Ceban presented the data analysis for the 50 participants enrolled by September 30th, 2023, in a compelling PowerPoint presentation.

The representative from the local Medical Authority expressed gratitude and admiration for this innovative approach, recognizing its potential to significantly impact Transnistria's medical landscape. This endorsement was timely and encouraging.

Subsequently, doctors directly involved in the pilot study shared their experiences, acknowledging initial apprehensions and ultimately celebrating their evolving trust in the method and their patients. Their testimonials provided valuable insights and bolstered the confidence of new working group members who were about to commence their training.

The latter part of the event was dedicated to the training session, where we presented the tools and methodologies used by their Tiraspol counterparts. Our personal IT department had ensured seamless access for each city to facilitate efficient patient information management. We conducted a tutorial involving a case study, allowing each participant to practice filling out the necessary forms. Despite some initial concerns about potential challenges specific to their institutions, it was unanimously decided to prioritize patient enrolment and address issues as they arise.

In summary, this day marked a significant achievement for the RHTC team. We successfully fulfilled our objective of assisting our colleagues in Transnistria in embracing progress, accepting change, and recognizing it as a positive stride toward the future of their community.

Source: [Reproductive Health Training Center](#)

Sana Sezim in protection of human trafficking victims

Currently, Kazakhstan is experiencing historic changes in the field of combating human trafficking. On behalf of the Head of State, a special law is being developed and considered that will provide protection and social support to citizens who have become victims of human trafficking. Human trafficking is considered one of the most severe human rights violations. Crimes related to human trafficking are domestic, regional and cross-border. Assessments by international organizations allow us to conclude that the scale of this problem is much more significant. It is important to note that victims of human trafficking are subject to violations of human rights, including sexual and reproductive rights, when girls are exploited in sexual exploitation and the provision of online pornographic services. This type of violence most often affects girls from vulnerable groups without the opportunity to protect their rights.

Under the chairmanship of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, a working group was created, which included all subjects of combating human trafficking to develop a separate draft Law “On combating human trafficking in the Republic of Kazakhstan”. Shakhnoza Khassanova, director of the PA LCWI “Sana Sezim”, also joined the working group to provide recommendations for the draft law.

There is currently no separate national law in Kazakhstan. The development of this draft law was carried out with the participation and discussion of more than 50 experts, including representatives of government bodies, international (UN, OSCE) and non-governmental organizations, as well as scientists from scientific research institutes, national and departmental higher educational institutions. International conventions ratified by the Republic of Kazakhstan, model laws of the CIS, the UN and

the experience of foreign countries were studied. Expert opinions from domestic scientists and international organizations were obtained.

When developing the draft Law, a number of main directions were formed:

- formation of a system to combat human trafficking, which includes the comprehensive work of government agencies and the civil sector;
- improving mechanisms for the prevention of trafficking in persons, in particular, conducting risk assessments and preventive measures;
- application of a victim-oriented approach.

At the same time, protection and assistance to victims of trafficking in persons is a mandatory international norm of many international treaties ratified by the Republic of Kazakhstan in the field of combating trafficking in persons.

The competencies of all anti-trafficking actors are outlined. A separate chapter is devoted to the protection of the rights of minors, as the most vulnerable category to human trafficking. In general, the development and adoption of a special law will allow us to develop a systematic and comprehensive approach to this problem, analyse the situation in the country taking into account the high degree of latency and minimize risks, consolidate the interconnection of such important countermeasures as cooperation, prevention, criminal prosecution and protection of the rights of victims of trafficking people.

In addition, structural changes have occurred in the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Kazakhstan, and a special Department for Combating Organized Crime (DCOC) has now been created, which will separately deal with the area of combating human trafficking. The Police Departments have designated special investigators who are responsible for identifying, suppressing, protecting and preventing human trafficking. The created DCOC will make it possible to better solve crimes related to human trafficking.

Source: [Sana Sezim](#)

HERA XXI at the ICPD30

The youth representative of Association "HERA XXI" MA IPPF was attended Regional Youth Consultations on Population and Development: Ensuring Rights and Choices on 17-18 October and Regional Conference on ICPD30, Population and Development: Ensuring Rights and Choices on 19-20 October. „We young people, as members of IPPF European Network and YSAFE, worked

together to prepare a statement for the thematic session "Families, Sexual and Reproductive Health over the life course" which was subsequently announced at the IPCD30 Regional Conference on 19-20 October."

At the conference, the following advocacy issues were raised from the side of the youth: affordable, accessible, inclusive youth friendly sexual and reproductive health services, commodities, and information (including comprehensive sexuality education), emergency contraception and safe abortion care, PrEP, hormonal therapy, irrespective of disability, sexual orientation, marital status or gender identity, free of stigma and discrimination, without the need for parental consent, especially in remote areas and those experiencing humanitarian crises. It was noted that for young people the barriers for accessing modern contraception include lack of knowledge, high cost, and judgmental attitudes of healthcare workers.

They called for age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education to be available to all young people as part of mandatory school curricula, and for challenges such as lack of quality and insufficient teacher training to be addressed. Young people noted that they want more investments in youth-friendly services that are of high quality, evidence-based, and uphold our rights to information and care. Although it all depends on high costs, all this will bring good results to the world, in better health and well-being, better jobs and education prospects, more equality, and more harmonious families and relations.

Source: [HERA XXI](#)

RESOURCES

European Commission's 2023 Report on Gender Equality in the EU

From the introduction:

While the European Union made progress on gender equality in the past year, women's rights have also come under pressure around the world. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine brought upheaval to the lives of all Ukrainians, but it has a particular impact on women and girls, exposing them to an increased risk to sexual violence, human trafficking and rape, and forcing many of them to flee the country (an option not available to men). Since the majority of those seeking protection in the EU were women and children, a particular gender-dimension was also witnessed in terms of access to

employment, health care services or housing, sometimes further exposing the refugees to gender-based violence.

The [report](#) is available online.

UPCOMING EVENTS

The 2nd annual FSTP Community of Practice (CoP) meeting

From the invitation:

Building upon the recommendations from the 1st regional event held in December 2022 in Belgrade, Serbia, we are excited to invite you to the 2nd annual FSTP Community of Practice (CoP) meeting.

*While the live event in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, includes a limited number of participants, mainly FSTP implementors actively involved in the CoP in the past year, we are kindly inviting you to join us **virtually** and contribute to the discussion on the review of the progress in the development of FSTP practices, current issues and novelties, and exchange knowledge on successful FSTP implementations.*

Key topics:

- *Reaching smaller organisations with simplified application and reporting procedures; successes and lessons learned;*
- *Development of inclusive selection criteria to reach out to more CSOs who have limited experience and financial capacity;*
- *Gender analysis to inform the design of the project/programme design and development of gender-sensitive indicators*
- *Strengthening the visibility and communication aspects of the FSTP grant beneficiaries;*
- *VAT practices and challenges (presentation of the TACSO manual and discussion on the current issues and practices; summarising key issues);*
- *Volunteering time and other examples of co-financing contribution for FSTP sub-grants experiences from the region.*

Please register using this [link](#) by Monday, November 6th, close of business hours.

For more details, check out the event page and the [draft agenda](#).

Launch of Analysis and use of health facility data: Guidance for maternal, newborn, child, and adolescent health programme managers and accompanying WHO capacity strengthening materials

From the event's website:

'Analysis and use of health facility data: guidance for MNCAH programme managers' describes a catalogue of indicators for maternal, newborn, child, and adolescent health (MNCAH) that can be monitored through health management information system data. The document provides guidance on possible analysis and visualization of the indicators, including considerations for interpreting and using the data for decision-making.

To accompany this guidance, WHO has developed presentation and exercise materials, including a facilitator guide, that can be used in workshops to strengthen capacity of analysis, interpretation, and use of data by MNCAH managers.

Join us on November 8 to hear more about the guidance document and capacity strengthening materials, and learn how programme managers and partners can use these resources.

Register [here](#).

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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