

BULLETIN

SRHR NEWS FROM CENTRAL
AND EASTERN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

03/2024

Burning issue:
**Poland's Ongoing Abortion Law
Debate: Recent Developments
and Challenges**

astra
network

Table of contents

Poland’s Ongoing Abortion Law Debate: Recent Developments and Challenges	3	Joint Statement: Paving the Way for an Equality-Centred Policy Cycle	14
Empowerment Through Self-Defense Workshops in June	4	Upcoming Events	16
Exchange Visit on July 25-26: Learning and Sharing Best Practices in Reproductive Health and Rights in Moldova and Romania	5		
ASTRA Board Member Daniela Draghici’s Recent Activities	6		
Civic Society, Democratic Values, and Human Rights Protection Under Attack in Slovakia	7		
Campaign for Comprehensive Sexuality Education in Zagreb Schools	8		
Protection of Vulnerable Migrants with Special Emphasis on Women’s Empowerment in the Context of Migration in Central Asia	9		
Accessibility of Safe Abortion Services in Georgia	10		
A.L.E.G. Hosts Youth Camp for Equal Rights in Romania	11		
Women’s Resource Center Advocates for Expanded Access to Abortion in Armenia	12		



BURNING ISSUE

Poland's Ongoing Abortion Law Debate: Recent Developments and Challenges

Recent developments in the Polish Sejm's parliamentary debate on abortion laws have seen significant advancements and setbacks. The Sejm recently voted on a bill supported by the Left that aimed at decriminalizing assistance in abortion cases. This proposal was part of broader efforts to liberalize Poland's restrictive abortion laws, which currently only allow abortions in cases of rape, incest, or when the woman's health or life is at risk.

However, the bill for decriminalization did not pass in the Sejm. Despite the ongoing push by the Civic Coalition and the Left to legalize abortion up to the 12th week of pregnancy and to improve support for those seeking abortions, the legislative body rejected the proposal to remove criminal penalties for assisting in abortion procedures.

This decision reflects the deep divisions within the Polish political landscape on the issue of abortion. President Andrzej Duda remains firmly opposed to decriminalization, asserting that it equates to taking human lives and has indicated he would veto such legislation if it were to pass. This stance continues to clash with the views of abortion rights activists who argue that the current laws are excessively restrictive and do not align with international standards for women's health and rights.

Despite these setbacks, the debate continues, with significant attention on how Poland will navigate these contentious issues moving forward.

Source: [FEDERA](#)

Empowerment Through Self-Defense Workshops in June

June was a vibrant month for Empowerment through Self-Defense (ESD) workshops led by Daniela Draghici, an ASTRA Network advisory board member. On International Children's Day, June 1st, Daniela conducted an ESD workshop at the Romanian Senate for the International Women's Association of Bucharest, with support from UNICEF Romania. Participants included 16 girls from the Dinamo Bucharest junior volleyball team, aged 8 to 13, and 7 teenage boys, aged 15 to 18. They practiced various strikes and assessed the training as essential for their safety. Plans were made for a future workshop on World Refugee Day, June 20.

On June 14th, Daniela led an ESD workshop for four teenage Roma girls, aged 14 to 19, alongside a rookie ESD instructor. The session included game-based exercises focusing on the five principles, strikes, boundary setting, and running from danger. Discussions arose around problematic situations young girls face, and the workshop concluded with a group circle, with participants expressing a desire for more training.

On June 15th, Daniela held an all-gender ESD workshop at Asociația ANAIS Hub for members of the Greek cultural association in Romania, Nostos. Six adults and one teenager attended, learning essential skills like identifying vulnerable body parts, strikes, and personal boundary defense. Feedback indicated they found

the training useful and enjoyable, with the teenager recommending it for other teens facing bullying.

To mark the International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict and World Refugee Day on June 20th, Daniela conducted a workshop for Ukrainian refugees in collaboration with Asociația ANAIS, supported by UNICEF Romania. Twelve secondary school students, aged 9 to 14, participated in the session themed "Our Home," concluding the project on a positive note.

The final ESD workshop in June was part of Bucharest PRIDE Week 2024, held for a diverse group of participants, including 15 Romanians, one Vietnamese, one Moldovan, and one Ukrainian, aged 19 to 30+. Despite varying expectations, all participants were impressed with the game-based exercises that developed their mental, verbal, and physical skills. They highly recommended this methodology for anyone, regardless of age or experience with conflict and gender-based violence.

Exchange Visit on July 25-26: Learning and Sharing Best Practices in Reproductive Health and Rights in Moldova and Romania

The Reproductive Health Training Center of the Republic of Moldova (RHTC) is pleased to share the outcomes of the exchange visit that took place on June 25 and 26 in Bucharest, Romania. This significant event brought together key organizations and stakeholders in the field of reproductive health and rights, featuring representatives from Centrul FILIA (Romania), Sexul vs Barza (Romania), and RHTC.

During the discussions, participants focused on Moldova's best practices in reproductive health and rights policies, information, and services, comparing them with the challenging situation in Romania. Over the years, Moldova has continuously grown and developed in this sector, with a proactive Ministry of Health that disseminated and approved necessary protocols throughout the public reproductive health system. These protocols included, but were not limited to, telemedicine medical abortion, which has greatly expanded access to safe reproductive health services.

In contrast, Romania has been lagging behind in several critical areas: abortion services, family planning services, and health and sexual education in schools. The lack of progress in these areas has significant implications for the well-being of communities, making this exchange visit particularly timely and important.

We hope that this meeting will facilitate an exchange of practices and ideas that will be most beneficial to the communities we serve. By learning from Moldova's successes and addressing the gaps in Romania's reproductive health system, we aim to improve services and policies that ultimately impact the health and rights of individuals.

Let's work together towards a future where reproductive health and rights are accessible, informed, and supported across all our communities.

Source: [Reproductive Health Training Center of the Republic of Moldova \(RHTC\)](#)



ASTRA Board Member Daniela Draghici's Recent Activities

Dialogue on Adolescent Communication:

Daniela Draghici, vice president of SEXUL vs BARZA, participated in a dialogue organized by F-Sides Cineclub titled "Restarting Communication with Adolescents." Panelists discussed strategies to create a safe and open environment for teenagers. Daniela challenged colleagues with the Traffic Light game-based exercise from the Empowerment through Self-Defense (ESD) workshop, highlighting the prevalence of red flag situations requiring intuition to avert.

Report Launch on Sexual and Reproductive Health:

Daniela attended the launch of the "Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Romania: Current Status and Future Trajectories" report by Plan International Romania. The event gathered experts from various organizations, including the Independent Midwives' Association, Girl Up Romania, and ANAIS Association, to discuss comprehensive sexuality education.

LGBT+@Work Conference: Daniela participated in the "LGBT+@Work Conference" organized by the Romanian Diversity Chamber of Commerce, supporting ACCEPT Association on a panel about attracting and onboarding LGBT+ talent early in careers.

Feminist Activists and Journalists

Dialogue: Daniela joined a timely dialogue

with feminist activists and journalists addressing gender-based violence, reproductive rights, and challenges in covering sensitive stories. She shared her experiences from the 90s and expressed gratitude for the journalists' professionalism today.

Pride March Participation: Daniela participated in the Bucharest Pride March organized by ACCEPT Association, which saw a record attendance of 27,000 participants.

Civic Society, Democratic Values, and Human Rights Protection Under Attack in Slovakia

Since the September 2023 election, the new Slovak government has been attacking civic society and human rights-defending NGOs. Following initial verbal assaults and accusations, a significant blow came in February when the Ministry of Justice canceled the call for grants supporting human rights projects. This cancellation occurred just one day before the applicant NGOs' public hearing and came without any explanation. Subsequent justifications were contradictory and frequently changed.

This grant was the only governmental funding scheme focused on human rights, and its cancellation prevented many promising projects from commencing. The mechanism was highly regarded for its transparency, involving a thorough evaluation process by a diverse committee, followed by an oral hearing, and final recommendations to the Minister of Justice, who had the ultimate decision-making power.

Although Freedom of Choice did not apply for the 2024 grant, we have been actively engaged in the civic response. As a member of the Slovak Government Council for Human Rights, National Minorities, and Gender Equality, and its Committee for Gender Equality, our director Adriana Mesochoritsová, along with her colleagues, insisted on renewing the call for grant proposals and maintaining transparent and participative

governance principles.

Persistent pressure led to several emergency meetings by the Council, resulting in the Ministry's promise to reopen or issue a new call for grants. However, in May, instead of reopening the call, the Ministry altered the grant mechanism through a decree, changing the evaluation committee's structure and the application evaluation process. These changes were implemented without consulting NGO experts or Council members, undermining the Council's role as a permanent advisory body to the Government of the Slovak Republic.

After considerable effort from Council members and civic society pressure, the Ministry finally renewed the grant call in June. However, this renewal was not the victory it appeared to be. The changes in the evaluation process remained, reducing transparency and deviating from principles of open and participative governance.

Despite these setbacks, we are proud to report that civic society remained united, resisting efforts to divide NGOs into "nonpolitical" and "political" categories, ensuring that all organizations continue to advocate for their crucial causes.

Source: [Možnosť voľby \(Freedom of Choice\)](#)

Campaign for Comprehensive Sexuality Education in Zagreb Schools

Young people in Croatia still lack access to comprehensive sexuality education, despite clear scientific evidence of its urgent necessity. Due to the longstanding lack of political will at the national level, cities have a crucial role in initiating positive changes. In light of this, CESI has launched a campaign to introduce comprehensive sexuality education in Zagreb's primary and secondary schools, leveraging the progressive political platform We Can!, currently in power in the City of Zagreb.

The campaign, #WhyWeAreSilent 3.0, emphasizes that society must choose how young people will learn about sexuality: through mistakes or in class, at a party or a lecture, from a priest or a teacher? As part of this initiative, CESI organized a round table titled "Sexual Education - Should Children Learn from Lessons or from Mistakes?" and a conference on "Comprehensive Sexual Education in Schools!" Additionally, Zagreb was adorned with posters advocating for sex education, and CESI activists distributed condoms and leaflets with quotations from textbooks to City Assembly representatives, highlighting the inadequacies in current sex education for today's youth.

This pressure led the City of Zagreb to promise the introduction of a comprehensive health program for primary and secondary schools, which

would include sex education. However, there has been no tangible progress. Despite the commitment, the City of Zagreb has yet to form an expert working group or present a work program and deadlines for implementing sex education.

Should Zagreb introduce comprehensive sex education, it would be the first city in Croatia to do so, positioning itself as a city that prioritizes the well-being, health, and quality of life for young people.

Source: [CESI - Center for Education, Counseling and Research](#)

Protection of Vulnerable Migrants with Special Emphasis on Women's Empowerment in the Context of Migration in Central Asia

Migration affects all aspects of life globally, including national security, social and economic development, health, education, labor, employment, environment, and gender. While some countries recognize migrants' contributions to economic development and poverty reduction, migrants remain one of the most vulnerable groups in Central Asia. Historically, "labor migrant from Central Asia" referred mainly to males, but more women are now part of these migration flows, contributing financially to their families and national economies. However, women face unique challenges and risks, such as becoming the "invisible labor force" in private households, facing sexualized violence and exploitation, and lacking formal contracts and work permits, which leads to unofficial employment, non-payment of wages, and illegal dismissals. Women with children encounter additional challenges, including access to education, cultural adaptation, healthcare, and discrimination. Many are unaware of new migration registration rules and the availability of free emergency medical care. Domestic violence is also a significant issue.

On June 16, 2024, Kazakhstan implemented a law to protect the rights of women and children, introducing over 70 amendments to support families, prevent violence, and increase penalties for violence against women and children. This

law aims to strengthen the institution of the family and the safety of minors.

PA LCWI "Sana Sezim," an organization dedicated to protecting the rights of women and children, including migrant women, is launching a study to assess awareness among migrant women about the new law, trust in law enforcement, and knowledge of available services for violence victims. Supported by IOM Kazakhstan and funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this research will involve women affected by migration and professionals in women's rights protection.

The study aims to change negative community attitudes and practices towards women affected by migration, supporting the implementation of national legislation protecting women's and children's rights. Through these efforts, PA LCWI "Sana Sezim" hopes to create a safer, more informed, and supportive environment for female migrants in Central Asia, contributing to their empowerment and overall well-being.

Source: [Sana Sezim](#)

Availability and Accessibility of Safe Abortion Services in Georgia

Position Statement by Association HERA XXI (2024)

Introduction

The disparity between the legal framework and the actual experience of women seeking abortion in Georgia is significant. Despite the legality of abortion on request up to the 12th week, barriers such as compulsory dissuasive counseling, waiting periods, unregulated conscientious objection, and lack of data transparency hinder women's access to the highest standard of health.

Legislative Environment

In Georgia, abortion is legal on request within the first 12 weeks of pregnancy. Between 12 and 22 weeks, abortions are permitted on medical grounds with conditions set by the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Social Affairs. Post-22 weeks, approval from a three-member medical committee is required. Amendments introduced in October 2023 have imposed new restrictions, deviating from WHO recommendations, particularly in pre-abortion counseling.

Challenges

Despite national and international frameworks for protection, the availability of sexual and reproductive health services in Georgia is restricted. The government does not effectively disseminate scientifically accurate information on safe abortion practices. Clinics often do not provide essential information, and there

are no accessible online platforms for women to obtain it.

Access to Safe Abortion Methods

Although safe methods like medical pills and manual vacuum aspiration (MVA) are available, invasive and unsafe procedures such as curettage are still prevalent. The lack of financial affordability remains a significant barrier, with safe abortion services not covered by the Universal Healthcare Package or private insurance plans. This financial burden, coupled with mandatory waiting periods and multiple ultrasounds, increases costs and delays, pushing women towards unsafe practices.

Backlash Against Safe Abortion Services

Recent amendments have introduced a compulsory five-day waiting period and multi-actor counseling involving a social worker, psychologist, and obstetrician-gynecologist, increasing financial costs and barriers to access. The mandatory ultrasounds further escalate service expenditures. These requirements contradict WHO recommendations and create significant barriers, especially in rural areas where healthcare professionals and facilities are limited.

Responsibility of Doctors and Limited Medical Facilities

Physicians are held accountable for any infringement of the five-day waiting period, and abortions beyond seven weeks gestation are restricted to in-patient medical centers, limiting geographical availability and accessibility.

Evidence-Based Work and Recommendations

Association HERA XXI emphasizes evidence-based approaches to improve availability and accessibility of safe abortion services. The 2022 study revealed a regression in service availability and readiness between 2016 and 2022. Key recommendations include revising the Law on Health Care to prioritize women's rights, aligning Order N75 with national protocols and WHO recommendations, implementing telehealth solutions, and ensuring adequate medical personnel for counseling.

Source: [HERA XXI](#)

A.L.E.G. Hosts Youth Camp for Equal Rights in Romania

From July 8-12, 2024, A.L.E.G. (Association for Liberty and Equality of Gender) successfully hosted the Youth Camp for Equal Rights, a transformative event designed to empower 20 young activists with the knowledge and skills to advocate for gender equality and promote relationships based on mutual respect.

Under the guidance of gender equality experts, psychologists, and the dedicated project team, the camp provided a platform for participants to engage in meaningful discussions and activities. Key topics included healthy relationships, human rights, feminism, gender equality, and tolerance. The camp aimed to foster new friendships, promote laughter, and encourage deep conversations.

A special highlight was the participation of Ewa Szymera, network coordinator at the ASTRA Network, who joined the camp on its second day. Ewa led an insightful discussion on reproductive rights and health, sharing valuable insights about policies in Poland. During the session on sexual education, participants emphasized the need for comprehensive reproductive health education, including hygiene, menstrual health management, safe contraception, mental health, tolerance for diversity, emotional relationship management, and prevention of sexual violence and sexually transmitted infections.

The camp also provided a creative outlet for the young activists through forum theatre, a form of performance art aimed at addressing social issues and changing attitudes. Participants wrote and developed a script that they will perform at the Gender Equality Festival in October 2024, an annual event organized by A.L.E.G. Throughout the summer, they will continue to attend personal development workshops and prepare for the performance.

Participants shared positive feedback, highlighting the open and welcoming atmosphere, and the invaluable learning experience. One participant noted, “Participating in the camp was an incredible experience. I met young people like myself, all sharing the same desire to learn and bring positive changes to society. Every day, we engaged in discussions about current issues such as discrimination, gender stereotypes, and human rights. I was surprised by how much I didn’t know and by the many new perspectives I discovered.”

This year’s Youth Camp for Equal Rights, supported by the Embassy of France in Romania, marks the third successful year of A.L.E.G. bringing together young people to champion gender equality.

Source: [A.L.E.G.](#)

Women’s Resource Center Advocates for Expanded Access to Abortion in Armenia

The Women’s Resource Center is actively supporting proposed amendments to Armenia’s reproductive health legislation, introduced by a group of parliamentarians on May 8th. These amendments aim to enhance sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), with a particular focus on abortion regulations.

The current proposal allows self-managed medical abortions up to 7 weeks of pregnancy in non-hospital settings. The Women’s Resource Center recommends extending this period to 10 weeks, in line with WHO standards, as many women discover unwanted pregnancies around the 7-week mark. Presently, medical abortion services are restricted to licensed obstetrical and gynecological care facilities. The proposed amendments suggest extending these services to primary healthcare institutions with gynecological facilities, thereby improving access and reducing unsafe abortion practices.

The current law mandates a three-day waiting period for women seeking abortions. The Women’s Resource Center advocates for the removal of this requirement to facilitate timely access to safe abortion services and reduce the likelihood of unsafe practices. Additionally, the proposed amendments seek to extend the allowance for abortions in cases of rape involving minors up to the 25th week of pregnancy, compared to the current limit of 22 weeks.

The Women's Resource Center emphasizes that these amendments are crucial for enhancing reproductive healthcare services, promoting women's rights, and safeguarding their well-being. They have prepared a comprehensive justification and intend to collaborate with MPs to advocate for these critical changes.

Source: The Women's Resource Center

Joint Statement: Paving the Way for an Equality-Centred Policy Cycle

The European Union was founded on the principles of equality and non-discrimination. Yet too many people continue to face discrimination and inequality across the Union, including intersectional and multiple forms of discrimination in all aspects of their lives. In the current climate, it is now imperative that the EU institutions strengthen their resolve to take meaningful and urgent action to address this reality.

As European Union leaders decide on their priorities for the 2024-2029 cycle, we call on them to ensure that equality and non-discrimination are included as central priorities in the EU work programme for the next five years. Only by centring equality and protection from discrimination in this way can the EU truly respond to the key concerns of people living in the Union.

The equality and non-discrimination agenda was afforded increased visibility and action during the last five years as a result of the ambitious “Union of Equality” agenda and the appointment of the first Commissioner for Equality. This led to unprecedented progress in efforts to advance equality and non-discrimination across EU policy making. Progress included the adoption of important initiatives such as the Directive on violence against women, inaugural Gender Equality and LGBTIQ Equality Strategies, an Anti-Racism Action Plan, a Green Paper on Ageing, an Action Plan on Integration and

Inclusion, a Strategy to strengthen the application of the Charter of Fundamental Rights in the EU, as well as the renewal of the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the EU Roma strategic framework.

At this critical juncture, it is vital that the EU continue to prioritize efforts to guarantee the founding values of equality and non-discrimination, to advance the entire package which comprises the Union of Equality, and to ensure an intersectional approach to this agenda. Failure to do so would seriously jeopardise progress in this area and mark a very dangerous step backward.

To this end, we call on EU leadership to take the following steps:

- Appoint a Commissioner for Equality and Fundamental Rights, ensuring the mandate has the power to renew and deepen the Union of Equality agenda and nominating a candidate with a demonstrated commitment to equality;
- Strengthen the Union of Equality agenda by introducing new strategies to address grounds not already covered, mainstreaming all strategies across policy areas and renewing and building-out existing equality strategies, such as the Gender Equality Strategy, LGBTIQ Equality Strategy, the EU Anti-Racism Action Plan, the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion, the EU Strategy on the rights of persons with disabilities and the Roma strategic framework;
- Ensure the next EU budget includes

robust funding streams for civil society organisations working on equality and non-discrimination;

- Ensure equality and non-discrimination objectives are also core components of EU priorities in the sphere of international cooperation, external and humanitarian action;
- Maintain the current status of the Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality and refrain from weakening its mandate;
- Establish a Council configuration dedicated to equality in the EU and ensure concrete commitments towards implementation of equality strategies by member states;
- Establish a new Directorate-General for Equality and Fundamental Rights thereby strengthening the Commission's ability to design and monitor equality and non-discrimination laws and policies;
- Renew and upgrade the mandates of the Commission Coordinators working on equality, ensuring a focus on intersectionality during this term;
- Entrust the Commission Task Force on Equality with a strong mandate and ensure it works transparently and in close consultation and cooperation with civil society organizations and networks.

As 146 civil society organisations with significant expertise on equality, and as representatives of groups at increased risk of discrimination across the EU, we issue this call as a testament to our solidarity with each other, and urge EU leaders to ensure that the people most affected by

EU policies and legislation on equality and non-discrimination are always involved in their development and implementation.

Source: [Center for Reproductive Rights](#)

Upcoming Events:

- A Shared Vision: Family Planning's Central Role in Advancing Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights EU policies and legislation on equality and non-discrimination are always involved in their development and implementation. [Registration](#)
- World Breastfeeding Week: 1 - 7 August 2024. [More info here](#)
- International Youth Day - 2024. From Clicks to Progress: Youth Digital Pathways for Sustainable Development. [More info here](#)
- Strengthening Analysis and Use of Routine Facility Data for Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health Webinar Series. [Registration](#)
- World Patient Safety Day - 2024. [More info here](#)



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