

BULLETIN

SRHR NEWS FROM CENTRAL
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Burning issue:
**Healthcare in Moldova
Under Attack: Fight the Ban
on Telemedicine Abortion**

astra
network

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BURNING ISSUE

Healthcare in Moldova Under Attack: Fight the Ban on Telemedicine Abortion

Stand Against the Ban on Telemedicine Abortion – A Dangerous Setback for Women’s Health and Rights

We, the undersigned organizations and advocates for reproductive health and rights, strongly condemn the decision of Moldova’s Minister of Health, Ala Nemerenco, to ban telemedicine medical abortion services. This harmful and unjustified restriction endangers women’s health, violates international medical guidelines, and rolls back essential reproductive rights.

Telemedicine medical abortion has been a safe, effective, and necessary service, particularly for women in rural areas and those facing barriers to in-person care. Since its introduction in Moldova in 2020, this service has pro-

vided vital healthcare access, ensuring that women can safely terminate pregnancies with proper medical guidance. The World Health Organization (WHO) explicitly recommends telemedicine medical abortion as a recognized standard of care, citing its safety, effectiveness, and ability to reduce costs and barriers to healthcare.

Despite this, the Moldovan government has chosen to act against scientific evidence and human rights, reportedly basing its decision on an anti-abortion petition. The rationale provided—concerns about Moldova becoming a so-called “tele-abattoir for unborn children”—is not only inflammatory but disregards the fundamental rights and healthcare needs of women. This move prioritizes ideology over medical science and bodily autonomy.

The Consequences of This Ban:

1. **Increased Health Risks:** Restricting access to legal abortion services does not reduce the need for abortion; it only forces women to seek unsafe methods.
2. **Barrier to Healthcare Access:** Many women, especially in rural and underserved areas, relied on telemedicine abortion as their only option for timely and safe care.
3. **Violation of International Health Standards:** The WHO's 2022 guidelines reaffirm telemedicine abortion as a safe, effective, and necessary component of modern healthcare.

Our Demands:

- **Immediate Reversal of the Ban** – The Moldovan Ministry of Health must restore access to telemedicine abortion services in line with WHO recommendations.
- **Protection of Women's Reproductive Rights** – Moldova must uphold its commitments to human rights, gender equality, and safe healthcare access.
- **Scientific and Evidence-Based Policies** – Reproductive health policies must be driven by medical science and not by political or ideological influence.
- **Regional and International Oversight** – We call on European institutions, UN bodies, and international human rights organizations to urge Moldova to reinstate telemedicine abortion and safeguard reproductive rights.

This decision is a major setback for women's healthcare in Moldova and sets a dangerous precedent for other countries in the region. We urge the Moldovan government to prioritize the health, dignity, and rights of women over misinformation and ideological pressure.

We stand in solidarity with Moldova's reproductive rights advocates and call on all allies—policymakers, international organizations, and civil society—to join us in demanding the reversal of this unjust ban.

Signed by:

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Society for Feminist Analyses, Romania
Freedom of choice, Slovakia
Sarajevo Open Centre, Bosnia and Herzegovina
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PONTON Group, Poland
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Fighting for Reproductive Justice in Georgia: Challenges, Resistance, and the Power of Solidarity

As anti-gender movements gain momentum and restrictive policies threaten access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) in Georgia, **Medea Khmelidze***, former Board Member of ASTRA Network, discusses the growing barriers to reproductive care, the impact on marginalized communities, and the grassroots resistance pushing back against these threats. In this interview, she highlights the power of activism, international solidarity, and youth engagement in the fight for bodily autonomy and gender equality.

Q: Could you provide an overview of the current state of SRHR in Georgia, particularly in relation to recent political events and restrictions on access to reproductive health services? How have these changes impacted marginalized communities?

Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) in Georgia are at a critical juncture. Despite ongoing efforts by civil society organizations (CSOs) to provide safe and stigma-free support, restrictive policies, rising anti-gender rhetoric, and systemic barriers continue to undermine access to essential services. These challenges disproportionately impact marginalized communities, including women living with HIV, ethnic minorities, and LGBTQI

individuals, making the struggle for reproductive justice more urgent than ever. Unwanted pregnancies remain a persistent issue in Georgia, exacerbated by stigma, restrictive regulations, and a lack of financial support for abortion services. Abortion is legal, but access is becoming increasingly complicated due to new legal barriers introduced under the guise of improving service quality. Mandatory psychological and social work consultations, additional ultrasound requirements, in line with the existing five-day waiting period have been implemented, creating delays that push individuals past the legal timeframe for medical abortion (currently permitted only up to 10 weeks). These obstacles reinforce the stigma surrounding abortion, portraying it as a morally questionable choice rather than a fundamental healthcare right. Financial barriers further complicate access. Abortion services are neither state-funded nor covered by private insurance, leaving those in financial distress with few viable options. Women in rural areas face additional difficulties, including a lack of nearby providers and long travel distances to access care. These combined challenges push some individuals toward unsafe abortion methods, increasing health risks.

Q: How has the anti-gender movement shaped public discourse and policy in Georgia? What strategies are being used by these groups, and how are they influencing societal attitudes toward gender equality and SRHR?

The growing anti-gender movement in Georgia has had a profound impact on public discourse and policy. Framing reproductive rights as a threat to traditional values, these groups have influenced legislation and public perception, making it harder for individuals to access abortion without judgment or obstruction. Tactics used by these movements include: Pressuring lawmakers to introduce restrictive measures; Spreading misinformation about abortion and SRHR; Influencing medical institutions to discourage providers from offering abortion services. This has led to a chilling effect, with some clinics ceasing to provide abortions altogether. Healthcare providers, fearing backlash, often adopt a judgmental stance, further dissuading patients from seeking care.

In recent years, Russia's political influence has grown in Georgia, particularly through legislative efforts that mirror repressive Russian policies. One clear example is the proposed "foreign agent" law, which closely resembles Russia's 2012 law used to suppress independent media, NGOs, and activists. This law would require organizations receiving foreign funding to register as "agents of foreign influence", potentially leading to increased state control and repression of civil society. Additionally, Georgia has seen pro-Russian political groups pushing narratives that align with the Kremlin's geopolitical interests, including anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric, conservative "family values" discourse, and opposition to Western integration.

Although same-sex relations are legal in Georgia, LGBTQ+ individuals still face systemic discrimination, hate crimes, and political hostility. Conservative forces, often influenced by both the Georgian Orthodox Church and Russian-backed groups, have blocked efforts to advance LGBTQ+ rights and have actively promoted laws that restrict freedom of expression and assembly for queer communities. These efforts aim to undermine democratic institutions and human rights movements in the country directly affecting SRHR grassroots work.

Q: Your work with "Real People, Real Vision" focuses on grassroots activism. What role do community-led initiatives play in countering anti-gender narratives and advocating for SRHR? Could you share any notable successes or challenges?

Despite these setbacks, Georgia's civil society remains a vital force in the fight for reproductive justice. Organizations in grassroots movements play an essential role in challenging restrictive policies and providing direct support to those in need by creating safe spaces for nonjudgmental counseling, connecting individuals with trusted healthcare providers, and raising awareness through public campaigns that challenge abortion stigma. However, activists face significant obstacles, including legal restrictions on advocacy, limited funding, and a hostile public discourse fueled by anti-gender movements, now linked with the fight for democracy through protests in Georgia.

Q: How important is international and regional collaboration, such as partnerships with organizations like ASTRA Network and the Solidarity Fund, in addressing SRHR issues and opposing anti-gender movements in Georgia?

International and regional collaboration is especially important in this challenging period, as it offers vital support to organizations and individuals working on SRHR issues and defending gender equality in Georgia. Sisterhood and solidarity play a central role in overcoming these challenges, and partnerships with organizations like the ASTRA Network and Safe Abortion Action Fund are key to the effort affecting access to abortion.

Moreover, the concept of sisterhood provides strength and resilience in the face of rising anti-gender movements. By collaborating with regional and international partners, local organizations can foster a sense of shared purpose and collective empowerment, especially for women and marginalized communities fighting for their SRHR and gender equality. This shared solidarity can inspire and sustain long-term advocacy efforts, even in difficult times. International networks give Georgian organizations a platform to raise their voices against the growing opposition to gender equality. By working together, they can amplify the calls for women's rights, providing a united front that challenges anti-gender ideologies and promotes the importance of SRHR for all women, including those facing the intersectional

burdens of gender, poverty, and exclusion. Collaborations with community organizations ensure that critical local SRHR programs, especially those led by women, can continue to thrive. This partnership allows for funding and resources that help organizations stay operational and resilient in the face of political or social challenges, ensuring that women's voices and needs are heard. In such a difficult moment, international solidarity networks also foster feminist connections that empower activists across borders. This sisterhood is vital in creating a strong, global network of women standing together to challenge restrictive laws, combat gender-based violence, and promote sexual and reproductive rights, even when these efforts seem under siege. Anti-gender movements can have a deeply demoralizing impact on women's rights activists. Regional and international networks can provide not only strategic support but also emotional and psychological solidarity, helping activists cope with the stress and challenges we face.

Q: What role do young people play in SRHR advocacy in Georgia? Are there specific challenges or opportunities in involving younger generations in these efforts?

Young people in Georgia are becoming increasingly active in SRHR advocacy, but they face unique challenges. Comprehensive sex education remains largely absent from the national curriculum, leaving many without the necessary knowledge to make informed

decisions about their reproductive health. However, opportunities exist to engage youth through: Digital activism and social media campaigns; Community peer education programs; By empowering younger generations with knowledge and advocacy tools, Georgia can build a sustainable movement that continues to fight for reproductive rights in the years to come.

It's important to highlight the significant outcomes of our efforts, particularly the engagement of young people. They played a pivotal role as pioneers in democratic and peaceful protests in the streets of Tbilisi, standing up for human rights and pushing back against the Russian-driven narrative. This was truly a youth- and women-driven movement, demonstrating the power of younger generations in advocating for change, even in the most challenging circumstances. Their courage and leadership have been instrumental in defending democratic values, ensuring that the fight for SRHR and gender equality remains in the spotlight and continues to gain momentum.

Q: What do you see as the most pressing priorities for advancing SRHR in Georgia in the face of anti-gender movements? Are there specific policy, advocacy, or community-level actions you would recommend?

To ensure safe, stigma-free access to abortion and reproductive health services, several urgent reforms are needed: Eliminating waiting periods,

unnecessary consultations, and other restrictive policies that create barriers to care; Educating both healthcare providers and the general public about reproductive rights and patient autonomy; Addressing the specific needs of women living with HIV, LGBTQI individuals, with special needs and ethnic minorities to ensure equitable access to services; Allocating funding to sustain CSO-led initiatives and ensuring that abortion services are affordable and accessible to all. Finally, building Stronger Coalitions – Strengthening alliances between NGOs, healthcare providers, and international partners to push back against regressive policies.

Georgia's struggle for reproductive rights is not just about abortion access—it is a fight for bodily autonomy, gender equality, and human rights. As anti-gender movements attempt to restrict freedoms, civil society, activists, and international allies must continue to resist regressive policies and push for systemic change.

With unwavering advocacy, strategic alliances, and grassroots mobilization, Georgia can move toward a future where reproductive health services are available, accessible, and free from stigma for all.

***Medea Khmelidze**, holds a Master's Degree in Social Work, has been in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights for more than 15 years. She is currently employed in Eurasian Women's Network on AIDS

(EWNA) as an Program Director and is an Advocacy officer at Union of People Living with HIV in Georgia-”Real People, Real Vision” (LIFE 2.0). Medea is an HIV and abortion activist and helps women and non binary people, who are most vulnerable and marginalized, to have access to stigma free, affordable services. She has been involved in the research work since 2012 up to date. Topics include but are not limited to Medical and social needs of vulnerable and marginalized populations, human rights violation analyses through the prism of social justice and autonomy, and access to medical and social services. Medea Khmelidze is a member of East Europe Central Asia and Balkan Countries women reproductive rights advocacy group “ASTRA Network”. She is also currently a lecturer of Professional Development at the Georgian-American University School of Medicine in Tbilisi.

Animated Videos on the Minimum Initial Service Package (MISP) for Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) in Crisis Situations in Transcaucasia and European Regions

Association HERA XXI as the AMAZE’s first creative partner, has developed 5 New animated videos on the topic: Minimum Initial Service Package (MISP) for Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) in Crisis Situations in Transcaucasia and European regions.

The Minimum Initial Service Package (MISP) for Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) in crisis situations is a series of crucial, lifesaving activities required to respond to the SRH needs of affected populations at the onset of a humanitarian crisis. Nowadays MISP is on the global agenda as wars, natural disasters, and crises have increased. These needs are often overlooked with potentially life-threatening consequences such as increased violence, exploitation, sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancies, and more.

Videos Topics:

- Crisis Settings: Taking care of your sexual health
- Crisis Settings: Sexual and gender-based violence
- Crisis Settings: Reducing risks
- Crisis Settings: Sexual and reproductive health information
- Crisis Settings: Health services

Videos are available on [Association HERA XXI’s YouTube channel](#) and [National youth platform](#).

Submitted by [HERA XXI](#)

Empowering Women: Celebrating a Decade of EMMA's Impact and Advancing Reproductive Rights in Hungary

In 2025, we will celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Emma Helpline and the fifth anniversary of the Community Roma Doula Service. To open the festive year and symbolically close the direct case service of our Humanitarian Programme, we organised a big evening in collaboration with the Hungarian French Institute.

It was a great opportunity to present the work of the Association, to give participants a better understanding of our activities and the way we support women. We presented our study based on qualitative research which focuses on the sexual and reproductive health experiences of Roma refugee women from Transcarpathia in Ukraine and the psychosocial support they received from EMMA field workers.

The full report is accessible in English [here](#).

In addition to the research, the participants were able to learn more about the Association's approach and activities through presentations by members of EMMA staff.

- EMMA Helpline: an anonymous helpline service for women facing difficulties in maternity care and motherhood;
- EMMA Hubs: a safe space for wom-

en to promote social justice and solidarity;

- Community Doula Service Programme: providing support to Roma women with regards to sexual and reproductive health and rights, specifically to promote access to maternity care and contraception;
- Humanitarian Programme: it was a case management focusing on sexual and reproductive health and rights for refugee women and girls.

Community Doula Service Programme: Our Choice!

After much preparation, sharing experiences, providing information, and conducting situational exercises, we are proud to announce that on the 25th of November, on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, eight Roma women completed our 40-hour Women's Community Companion training program.

It brings us great joy that our community doulas, who have been active for years in Alsózsolca, now have new companions, and we hope they will grow and share experiences together in the future. With our further joint plans, we aim to better advocate for and support the sexual and reproductive rights of Roma girls and women in Eastern Hungary, ensuring they have broader access to health care service.

The training is a part of our project in consortium with the Somnaku-no Drom Roma Women Associa-

tion, aims to establish and operate a network of community companions for women in disadvantaged Roma communities in Eastern Hungary.

We are delighted that our community doulas, who have been active in Alsózsolca for 5 years, have new partners, and in the future they will grow together and share experiences. With our further joint plans, our goal is to better advocate for and support the sexual and reproductive rights of Roma girls and women in Eastern Hungary, ensuring them wider access to health services.

MARA Programme

The MARA programme was launched by the Romaversitas Foundation and the EMMA Association in 2023. The objective of this initiative is primarily to empower Romani women activists and community organizers in Hungary to become advocates and leaders in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Last year as a successful launch of the Mara Circles we worked with 16 Roma women to foster a strong Roma women's community committed to their fellow women and their physical and mental health. The second year of Mara Circles has just started in January!

In monthly learning sessions, we explore topics related to SRHR, where participants can share their own thoughts and experiences, ask questions and learn from each other and discuss the arising

issues. We ensure that everyone has the opportunity to learn and grow on a personal level, while doing our best to build a supportive and connected community among the women who attend. In addition, we pay particular attention to reflect on societal aspects.

EMMA Helpline: Reflecting on 10 Years of Impact

EMMA Helpline celebrates its 10th anniversary in 2025. Since its launch, our Helpline has been a lifeline for mothers and women, offering guidance, resources and women-centered, trauma-informed support to about 500 women and girls annually.

Operated by a team of 30 extensively trained volunteers on rotation, the helpline is available by a toll-free phone number for 20 hours each week and by email 24/7. This unique peer support service offers a safe environment for individuals to discuss a range of issues, including traumatic birth experiences, instances of obstetric violence, intimate partner violence, and more, while ensuring further assistance is readily accessible when required.

As of the end of 2024, we have successfully completed the training of a new cohort of helpline volunteers, who have already joined in the daily operation of EMMA Helpline. This comprehensive 46-hour face-to-face training curriculum equipped the volunteers with a deeper understanding of the intersections of sexual and reproductive

health and rights, systemic barriers to health care and gender based violence, along with trauma-informed support skills. To ensure the resilience and mental well-being of our helpline volunteers and to prevent burnout, we facilitate monthly supervision sessions and case discussions.



Submitted by [EMMA Association](#)

Women in Kazakhstan: A Fight on Two Fronts

In Kazakhstan, women are fighting battles both at home and within the system meant to protect them. Domestic violence is rampant, yet the law fails to recognize it as a distinct crime. Many victims are left with nowhere to turn—shelters are scarce, underfunded, and often inaccessible. Reporting abuse rarely leads to justice; instead, women face indifference from police and stigma from society, forcing many back into unsafe homes.

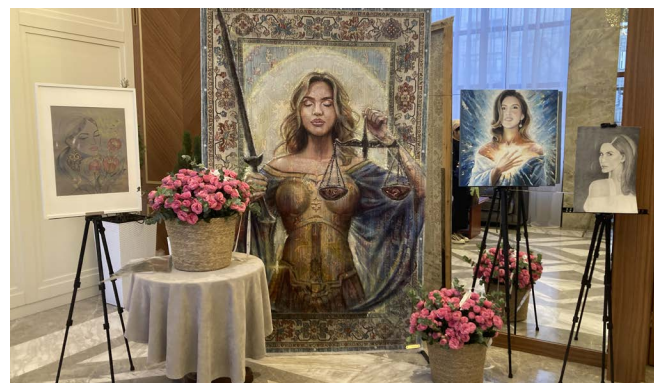
But the problem doesn't end at the doorstep. Women in Kazakhstan face systemic discrimination in the work-

place and public life. Legal processes are complicated and unsupportive, and gender equality remains a low priority for policymakers. Cultural norms silence victims, framing violence as a “private matter” and discouraging women from speaking out.

Amid these challenges, organizations like Sana Sezim provide critical support, offering safety and resources to victims. International advocates, including ASTRA Network, are amplifying these voices, demanding action and accountability.

The women of Kazakhstan are resilient, but they shouldn't have to fight alone. Solidarity, both local and global, is essential to push for reforms, raise awareness, and ensure that every woman can live with dignity and safety. Their stories must be heard, and their struggle must lead to change.

Read the full article written by Michalina Kowol here: https://vlast.kz/english/62878-women-in-kazakhstan-are-not-only-oppressed-in-the-family-but-also-by-the-system.html?fbclid=IwY2xjawHWUphleHRuA2FlbQlxMQABHeK4dUaw7lod0-E7OkgSkIPYfAfJAAjORmzc1GIS42cliVGYNKQtFGi7ng_aem_yAmkV8XcO63ILXRTTYT3Ug



Gender equality in Kazakhstan: educating young people in rural areas

An important initiative aimed at promoting gender equality and combating violence in rural areas has been launched in southern Kazakhstan. Since January 2025, a series of training sessions for youth and law enforcement officers has been implemented in the Turkestan region. The initiative is organized by the PA LCWI “Sana Sezim,” a member of ASTRA Network, in partnership with the Embassy of France.

Discussions about women’s rights and gender equality are most often held in major cities, while rural regions remain overlooked. However, it is precisely in these areas that changing perspectives and breaking long-standing stereotypes is crucial. Traditions are undoubtedly important, but they should not serve as justification for discrimination and violence.

The project aims to teach teenagers and young people how to build healthy, respectful relationships. Violence, including domestic violence, often begins when there is no understanding of boundaries and equal rights. By fostering a culture of nonviolent communication from an early age, we can help prevent many tragedies in the future – from domestic abuse to violations of sexual rights. During the training sessions, participants not only learn theoretical concepts but also practice applying their new knowledge. How do you talk about your rights? What is gender equality? How can you

recognize the early signs of violence in relationships? How can you overcome fear and stand up for yourself and others? All these questions are discussed in a safe and supportive environment.

In addition to education, the project also offers free legal consultations and social support for those who have faced discrimination or violence. Information campaigns help spread these important messages to the entire rural population.

This project is more than just a series of lectures. It empowers young people to change their perspective on the world and build relationships based on respect and understanding. Step by step, we are moving toward a society where no one is left alone with their pain, and the rights of women and men are truly equal.

Submitted by [Sana Sezim](#)

Strengthening Support for Vulnerable Communities in Poland and Beyond: HumanDoc’s Ongoing Efforts in SRHR and GBV Initiatives

Cooperation with Plan International

Recently, 60 dignity/hygiene kits were distributed among beneficiaries in flooded areas of Dolnośląskie and Opolskie voivodeships. In response to the ongoing crisis, our team, in cooperation with local partners, continues to assess

needs and provide essential support to affected communities. The distribution aimed to help individuals maintain basic hygiene and dignity in difficult circumstances. Further assistance efforts are underway to ensure sustained support for those in need.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland

In 2024, the HumanDoc Foundation, in collaboration with Georgian partners, implemented the first module of a comprehensive 2.5-year support program for individuals experiencing domestic violence in Georgia. The project was co-financed under the Polish development cooperation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland. The activities included the modernization of support infrastructure (renovation and equipment of the state shelter in Gori), the development of staff competencies (officials, teachers, psychologists, lawyers, etc.), and direct support for beneficiaries, such as psychological, legal, and informational assistance, as well as upskilling courses for women from rural areas. In 2025, the continuation of activities is planned, including the renovation of the shelter in Zugdidi and a space for working with children, direct support for beneficiaries, as well as further training and the development of local child protection standards in cooperation with partners.

Cooperation with Fundacja YES Jestem Kobietą and Wysokie Obcasy Extra

We have officially launched activities under the NIEobojeźne project, aimed at increasing safety and support for women in small communities by building local support networks and raising awareness about domestic violence prevention. The first meetings have already taken place, led by an expert running Municipal Social Welfare Center in Opole, who specializes in education on gender-based violence (GBV). These sessions marked the beginning of our efforts to empower local leaders—such as communities representatives and members of rural women’s associations—to become ambassadors of change in their communities.

Cooperation with CARE International Poland

Additionally, HumanDoc is supporting another initiative focused on training staff at Voivodeship Centers for the Integration of Foreigners, providing them with the necessary tools to better assist migrants and refugees. As part of this project, we have developed contributions for an e-learning awareness course on gender-based violence (GBV), helping the staff understand its causes, consequences, and ways to provide appropriate support to those affected. In the coming months, we plan to conduct online and in-person training sessions, as well as online supervision sessions for the staff, ensuring continuous development and improved support for foreign nationals in Poland.

Submitted by [HumanDoc](#)

Fico's Government Continues Attacks on Civil Society and Reproductive Rights in Slovakia

The government of Robert Fico persists in undermining civil society by defunding NGOs and weakening subsidy schemes. Verbal attacks on members of non-profit and civil organizations continue, creating a hostile environment for activists. The latest example of this is the Art Support Fund's decision to withhold funding from the Drama Queer Festival—one of the few LGBTI+ cultural events in Slovakia. These attacks on civil society directly impact gender equality by weakening feminist organizations and their advocacy work.

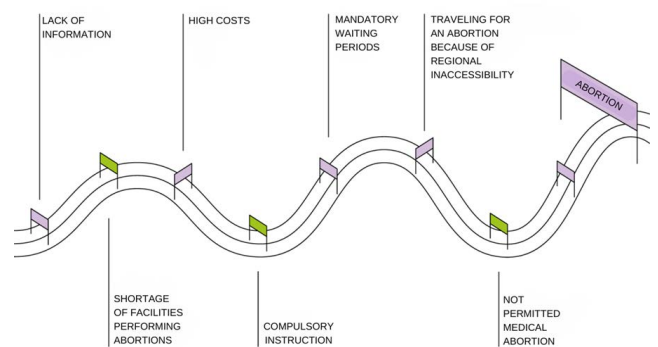
We remain a critical voice against these attempts to curtail civil society. Our statutory representative, Adriana Mesochoritsová, is actively defending human rights and gender equality as a Member of the Government Council for Human Rights, National Minorities and Gender Equality, as well as the Committee on Gender Equality.

Reproductive Rights Under Threat

While the current coalition is not actively pushing for further restrictions on reproductive rights at this moment, the situation remains deeply problematic. Možnosť voľby (Freedom of Choice) continues to advocate for accessible abortion rights and supports opposition Members of Parliament in resisting restrictive measures.

We continue with providing telephone line helping people seeking abortion care and information about contraception, covering services that should be provided by the state.

Abortion in Slovakia is already highly inaccessible due to high costs (exceeding half a month's minimum wage), a mandatory 48-hour waiting period, and a restrictive legal timeframe—abortions are only permitted up to 12 weeks of pregnancy.



Advocacy Focus: Medical Abortion and the so-called Conscientious Objection

Our advocacy efforts are currently centred on two critical issues: the legalization of medical abortion and the harmful refusals of care on grounds of conscience.

- **Medical Abortion:** Despite being widely recognized by medical professionals as a safe and modern method, medical abortion remains illegal in Slovakia. The only barrier to its legalization is the lack of a minister of health willing to sign the necessary authorization. We continue to push for alignment with WHO guidelines, which highlight its

safety, effectiveness, and accessibility—ensuring greater privacy and convenience for those seeking abortion care.

- **Harmful Refusals of Care on Grounds of Conscience:** the harmful refusals of care on grounds of conscience severely limits abortion access in Slovakia. Although international human rights standards require states to ensure that so-called conscientious objection does not create barriers to essential healthcare, Slovakia fails in this regard. Currently, 34% of health facilities refuse to provide abortions at a woman's request. One in four women (25%) has faced refusal from reproductive health providers, with clinics denying them information, necessary paperwork, pre-operative examinations, or the procedure itself. Some women are forced to seek care abroad, experiencing unnecessary stress, humiliation, and fear in the process.

Ongoing Research and Resistance

We continue to investigate and expose anti-choice strategies that seek to restrict reproductive freedom. Now, more than ever, feminist advocacy is crucial in defending civil society, reproductive justice, and gender equality in Slovakia. According to this research we will then determine the strategy of resistance towards anti-choice actors sharing the conclusions with other feminist organizations in Slovakia.

Advancing Reproductive Rights in North Macedonia: HERA's Training and Advocacy for Safe and Legal Abortion

On September 28, International Day for Access to Safe and Legal Abortion, HERA – Association for Health Education and Research conducted training for primary health care gynecologists on medical abortion and modern contraception.

Organized in cooperation with MAGO – Macedonian Association of Gynecologists and Obstetricians and the University Clinic for Gynecology and Obstetrics, Skopje, the training was accredited by the Medical Chamber. Participants learned about the legal framework, implementation methods, practical case studies, and psycho-social counseling.

A total of 26 gynecologists completed the training, where HERA's brochure, featuring updates from the new Clinical Guidelines for pregnancy termination up to 22 weeks, was also introduced.



Submitted by [Možnosť voľby](#)

More than 60 students from the Medical School at the University “St. Kliment Ohridski” - Bitola had the opportunity to learn more about medical abortion and discuss it with doctors from the University Clinic for Gynecology in Skopje, at the training conducted by HERA – Health education and research Association.



HERA - Association for Health Education and Research on the occasion of September 28 - International Day for Access to Safe and Legal Abortion, held a press conference at which statements were made by the Director of the University Clinic for Gynecology and Obstetrics, the President of MAGO - Macedonian Association of Gynecologists and Obstetricians, and a representative of HERA.

At the press conference, the focus was on the fact that medical abortion is the safest way to terminate a pregnancy. The University Clinic of Gynecology and Obstetrics successfully implements and implements medical abortion, making it the choice of over 80% of patients undergoing termination of pregnancy.

Reproductive justice, in addition to the right to choose, also includes the right to equal access to health services, information and support - as well as the right for every woman to be able to decide about her own body and make an informed decision, without fear or discrimination.

Every woman deserves and has the right to a safe, legal and accessible abortion. Reproductive and sexual rights and freedoms cannot be a matter of personal privilege, but on the contrary, they should be guaranteed for all of us. Each of us has a responsibility to ensure that safe health services, support and information are available to all - because reproductive justice is fundamental to all of us.



Submitted by [HERA](#)

Development of Clinical Guidelines for Medical Abortion Care and Strengthening Cooperation with Center for Reproductive Rights in Armenia

Following the adoption of amendments to the Republic of Armenia’s Law on “Human Reproductive Health and Reproductive Rights” in August 2024, the Women’s Resource Center (WRC), in collaboration with leading experts in obstetrics and gynecology, has undertaken the development of clinical guidelines for medical abortion care. The revised legislation permits medical abortion up to 8 weeks of pregnancy to be conducted at antenatal clinics and allows women the option to self-administer the prescribed medication at home. These key legislative changes are being incorporated into the clinical guidelines, which are aligned with the latest World Health Organization (WHO) Abortion Care Standards. The guidelines are currently in the final stages of development and will soon be submitted to the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Armenia for approval.

Furthermore, WRC recently hosted a workshop in collaboration with representatives from the Center for Reproductive Rights, who visited Armenia to support efforts aimed at strengthening reproductive rights protections. During the visit, a training session was conducted with women’s rights organizations, activists, and obstetricians-gynecologists to explore pathways for align-

ing Armenia’s abortion care legislation and policies with international human rights and public health standards. This partnership represents a significant advancement in the promotion of comprehensive, rights-based reproductive healthcare in Armenia.

Submitted by [WRC](#)

Improving Women’s Health Through Advancing Cervical Cancer Screening Programs in North Macedonia

Introduction

Cervical cancer remains a significant public health challenge worldwide, and North Macedonia is no exception. Screening programs play a crucial role in the early detection and prevention of this disease. The monitoring analysis of the “Early Detection and Screening Program for Malignant Diseases,” with a particular focus on cervical cancer screening, provides valuable insights into the program’s effectiveness, gaps, and opportunities for improvement. This article highlights key findings and recommendations to enhance the reach and impact of the screening program.

The Importance of Cervical Cancer Screening

Cervical cancer is one of the leading causes of cancer-related mor-

tality among women, despite being one of the most preventable cancers through early detection and intervention. Regular screening, particularly through Pap smears and HPV testing, enables healthcare providers to identify precancerous changes in cervical cells, allowing timely treatment before the disease progresses. Countries with well-established screening programs have seen significant declines in cervical cancer incidence and mortality rates. Unfortunately, North Macedonia's current program struggles with accessibility and efficiency, limiting its potential to save lives.

Current Challenges and Areas for Improvement

In North Macedonia are living approximately 925.000 women, each year approximately 200 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer, and annually from 40 to 60 women die from this malignant disease.

Since 2012 each year the Government adopts and Ministry of health implements the annual Program for screening and early detection of malignant diseases, and one component of this Program is the cervical cancer screening. Association ESE is constantly monitoring the implementation of the cervical cancer screening program, including women from vulnerable communities (Roma, rural etc.) in the monitoring process. Through our monitoring work we constantly identify the challenges of this program which leads towards in-

sufficient coverage of women with the screening. Despite that the main goal of the Program foresees coverage of 75% of women age 21 – 59 in three year period, in reality the coverage is only around 30%. During the pandemic years coverage was drastically reduced even below 5% annually. Situation is even worse among Roma women, since only around 10% of Roma women are covered with cervical cancer screening.

Many women, especially those in rural and marginalized communities, face logistical and financial barriers that prevent them from undergoing screening, due to the lack of gynecologists on primary level and their uneven geographical distribution. Additionally, financial constraints have led to inconsistent budget allocations, and transparency regarding budget distribution has declined in recent years. Namely, the last available report for the implementation of the screening is for year 2021. Some allocated funds have been redirected to cover outstanding debts, further limiting the program's ability to function effectively. Each year around 11 million MK Denars (app. 179.000 Euros) are allocated for the cervical cancer screening, which according to the prices is sufficient to cover only 5% of the women with screening annually.

Public awareness about cervical cancer screening has also declined, as the program has not included health education campaigns since 2023. Without proper information, many women remain unaware of the importance of

regular screenings and how to access them. The introduction of an electronic self-registration system was meant to facilitate screening appointments, but it has instead created accessibility barriers for those who lack digital literacy or internet access. This issue is particularly prevalent among vulnerable groups and rural populations, who often struggle to navigate the online system. Moreover, through our work with Roma women we conducted a research which showed that even after 12 months of applying for screening through the electronic platform the women did not get an appointment with their gynecologist in order to perform the screening.

Another significant setback was the removal of HPV testing from the program in 2024, since in the previous years was introduced as pilot testing in the program. HPV testing is recognized as a more precise method for early detection compared to traditional Pap smears, and eliminating it from the screening process reduces the likelihood of timely intervention. Thus instead to move forward and the HPV testing to be increased in the program, now it's completely removed. Meanwhile, the mobile gynecological unit, an initiative designed to reach underserved areas, operated for only three months in 2023. While this effort had the potential to bridge the accessibility gap, its limited duration restricted its impact, since only 508 women used the services of the mobile gynecological unit in 2023. Expanding the mobile unit's operational period and increasing the number of

healthcare professionals involved could help address this shortcoming. Moreover more comprehensive involvement of local and grassroots CSOs is needed in this effort in order to properly inform the women about the importance of the screen and to increase the demand for services in underserved areas.

Strategies for Enhancing the Screening Program

To improve the effectiveness of the cervical cancer screening program, several key steps must be taken. Increasing program coverage should be a top priority, with additional funding allocated to ensure that at least 75% of the eligible female population undergoes screening within a three-year period. This can be achieved through stronger collaboration with primary healthcare centers and local organizations that facilitate outreach initiatives. Reintroducing HPV testing is another crucial step, as it provides a more accurate diagnosis and aligns with global best practices in cervical cancer prevention.

Greater budget transparency is also necessary. Future screening programs should include a clear financial breakdown to ensure that funds are appropriately allocated to each activity. Establishing an independent monitoring mechanism with involvement of CSOs and citizens would help oversee the use of resources and identify areas for improvement. Moreover the reports for program and budget implementation of the program should be made publicly

available on annual basis. Furthermore, expanding public awareness campaigns would encourage more women to participate in screening. These initiatives should use multiple platforms, including television, social media, community outreach, and collaborations with NGOs, to ensure a wider reach.

Accessibility to screening must also be improved. In addition to the self-registration system, proactive patient outreach by healthcare providers should be implemented. Mobile screening units should be operational year-round, with designated screening days at primary healthcare centers to provide additional opportunities for women to undergo screening. Addressing the shortage of gynecologists is another critical challenge. Incentives should be introduced to encourage gynecologists to work in underserved areas, and general practitioners, especially specialists in family medicine should receive training to perform screening. Government scholarships and financial support for medical students and doctors who commit to working in rural and underserved areas could help alleviate this issue in the long run.

Financial investment in the program should also be significantly increased. Allocating at least 33 million MK Denars (app. 537.000 Euros) annually would enable the expansion of services. This financial commitment would ensure that the program operates efficiently and that women have continued access to life-saving screenings.

Conclusion

Cervical cancer screening is a vital public health intervention that has the potential to save thousands of lives. Addressing the current shortcomings and implementing targeted improvements will strengthen North Macedonia's screening program, ensuring that more women receive timely and effective preventive care. Sustained investment, policy adjustments, and proactive community engagement will be essential to achieving better health outcomes for women across the country. Through collaborative efforts between government agencies, healthcare institutions, and local organizations, North Macedonia can build a more comprehensive and accessible screening program that prioritizes women's health and well-being.

Submitted by [ESE](#)

Spotlight on Bosnia and Herzegovina: Research on Anti-Abortion Narratives

In December 2023, new research on anti-abortion narratives in Bosnia and Herzegovina was published, providing an in-depth look at the key actors and strategies opposing reproductive rights. Conducted in collaboration with the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), the research identifies key organizations, funding sources, and messaging tactics used to undermine reproductive rights. It high-

lights how anti-abortion narratives are spreading through religious institutions, conservative political groups, and international organizations with ties to the global “pro-life” movement. The full report is available [here](#).

BIRN also produced a video summarizing the findings, which can be watched [here](#). One of the major findings is the role of American conservative organizations in supporting anti-abortion efforts in Bosnia. An investigative article published on Detektor.ba explores how these groups provide funding, resources, and ideological backing to local anti-choice actors. This influence is seen in coordinated campaigns against abortion rights, misinformation about reproductive health, and efforts to restrict access to safe abortion services. The article can be accessed [here](#). For English readers, Balkan Insight published an article discussing the growing presence of anti-abortion groups in Bosnia, available [here](#).

For more insights on the spread of anti-abortion narratives in Bosnia and Herzegovina, visit the SAAF website [here](#). This research underscores the urgent need to counter misinformation and protect reproductive rights in the region.

Submitted by [SOC](#)

The 19th Gender Equality Festival in Romania: Promoting Women’s Rights, Reproductive Health, and Social Engagement

The 19th edition of the Gender Equality Festival®, organized by A.L.E.G. Association, brought four days full of activities to the public in Sibiu, aimed at encouraging social engagement and promoting women’s rights and gender equality. The festival’s events addressed essential topics for today’s society, from the prevention of gender-based harassment and combating human trafficking to exploring the recent history of reproductive rights in Romania.

One of the main focuses of this year’s edition was for reproductive health. In this sense, the third day of the festival brought a discussion on the recent history of reproductive health in Romania, marked by the screening of “Children of the Decree” directed by Florin Iepan. Camelia Proca moderated a dialogue with prominent women’s rights activists on both national and international levels: Daniela Drăghici, Mihaela Miroiu, Adriana Lamackova and Veronica Teleuca. They discussed the devastating impact of the abortion ban during the communist era and the actions taken over the past thirty years to ensure access to reproductive health and education. The participants also had the opportunity to get involved by signing the My Voice, My Choice and Free Contraceptives for Youth initiatives.

The first day of the festival was dedicated to preventing gender-based harassment in various environments, such as schools, universities, workplaces and public spaces. A workshop for collages for A.L.E.G. volunteers and one session dedicated to student from university provided essential information on recognizing forms of harassment as well as a demonstration of the ESD (Empowerment Through Self-Defense) method. Key prevention messages were shared with the general public through the Horizontal Newspaper and the screening of the movie “MO” offered an opportunity for open discussions on safety and respect for women.

On the second day, A.L.E.G. volunteers presented the forum theater performance “Paper dreams” with a script that was conceived by them during this summer’s Youth Camp. The performance was an emotional experience, illustrating the risks of human trafficking for young people who dream of a better future abroad. The audience participated actively – their interventions guided the story toward avoiding the exploitation of the main character and highlighted the importance of repairing parent-child relationships.

The festival concluded with the Living Library where the guests - Ioana Ciuban, Daniela Drăghici, Marian Enache, Tetiana Kolot, Adriana Lamackova, Roxana Mărcoiu, Ligia Moise, Ioana Pasc, and Veronica Teleuca - shared life experiences that inspired participants to “Dare!” to take action for a safer world.

The Gender Equality® Festival is an awareness campaign organized by the A.L.E.G. Association, aimed primarily at young people, to help them become friends with concepts such as human rights and women’s rights.

More details about the festival can be found here <https://aleg-romania.eu/en/how-was-at-the-19th-edition-of-the-gender-equality-festival/>



Submitted by [A.L.E.G.](https://aleg-romania.eu/)

Empowerment Through Self-Defense: ASTRA Board Member Daniela Drăghici Leads ESD Workshops Across Europe

In her role as lead Empowerment through Self-Defense (ESD) instructor, Daniela Drăghici, ASTRA Network board member, conducted multiple workshops focused on equipping participants with practical self-defense skills and strategies for personal safety.

In October, as Vice President of the Romanian Women's Lobby, Daniela led a workshop for colleagues in the European Women's Lobby Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights & Sexual Exploitation Task Force. This marked a premiere for ESD within the group, with hopes of making it a recurring session during future annual meetings, similar to ASTRA Network's practice. Participants gained valuable insights into the five principles of Empowerment through Self-Defense, learning to develop situational awareness, trust their intuition, use their voice and body language to set boundaries, de-escalate conflict, and employ effective self-defense techniques.

In November, to mark the 13th Annual Fodada International Women's Self-Defense Day, Daniela led four ESD workshops, reaching a total of 42 participants, including three colleagues from ASTRA member NGO Reproductive Health Training Center in Moldova. These sessions emphasized the importance of seeking help and supporting others in

situations of danger or harassment.

On December 6, as part of the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence, Daniela gifted 11 young girls a special self-defense workshop, co-organized with the Society for Feminist Analyses, an ASTRA member, and Art Fusion Association, and hosted by ANAIS Association. The session created a space for learning, empowerment, and connection, equipping participants with mental, verbal, and physical self-defense techniques to help them feel safer, more confident, and prepared to respond effectively in conflict situations.

On December 18, Daniela conducted a 4-hour session at the Kids' Corner as part of the International Women's Association of Bucharest Christmas Bazaar at the National Library. The 2024 theme, "Empowering Vision, Enriching Lives", focused on supporting individuals with visual impairments. More than 20 children and teenagers aged 3-15 participated, representing 60 diplomatic missions. The workshop provided them with essential self-defense skills to navigate and protect themselves from bullying within the education system in Romania.



SEX vs THE STORK Secures Key Role in Romania's Economic and Social Council, Strengthening SRHR and Women's Rights Advocacy Until 2029

SRHR and Women's Rights Organisations will be represented in The Economic and Social Council of Romania until 2029 by SEX vs THE STORK Association

SEX vs THE STORK Association (Asociația SEXUL vs BARZA) has won a new 4 year mandate in The Economic and Social Council of Romania (CES), a consultative body of the Parliament and of the Government of Romania, in socio-economic fields. Its aim is to achieve the tripartite dialogue at national level among employers, trade unions and representatives of civil society, non-governmental organisations and foundations. This is a win both for the association and for the SRHR and the women's rights sector, because this mandate has created a position in the council for a representative for our domain. Given the fact that over 34% of the newly elected MPs represent far right parties, having access to the legislative proposals impacting women's lives and health is essential for identifying future threats before they are voted.

The SRH working group of the Romanian Ministry of Health has been reactivated at the end of 2024

After a long hiatus, the SRH working

group has started to organise weekly meetings in order to shape the official strategy for sexual and reproductive health, which has stagnated and has lacked a budget for several years now. One of the main priorities of the group is unlocking the Contraceptive Plan which proposes a 1.5 mil EUR budget for free contraception for the most vulnerable people in Romania. This amounts to around 0.05% of the overall annual budget of the Ministry of Health, which makes it a realistic advocacy goal for Romanian SRHR organisations. SEX vs THE STORK Association is part of the working group.

Submitted by [SEXUL VS BARZA](#)

UPCOMING EVENTS & CAMPAIGNS

The first EU-wide research on period poverty is underway! Led by PhD researcher Maria Carmen Punzi and sponsored by MEPs Saskia Bricmont, Mélissa Camara, and Diana Riba from The Greens/EFA in the European Parliament, this project aims to deepen understanding and provide recommendations to EU institutions on tackling period poverty. For more info, go here: <https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7287025650400460803/>

The “My Voice, My Choice” European Citizens’ Initiative has surpassed one million signatures, pushing the European Commission to review its proposal. The initiative calls for the creation of a fund to support women in Europe who cannot access abortion services in their home countries, allowing them to travel to jurisdictions with more permissive laws. Every signature counts—add yours: <https://www.myvoice-mychoice.org/>

ASTRA Network will be present at the **69th Commission on the Status of Women (CSW69)** and **International Conference on Family Planning (ICFP)** in Bogotá, Colombia. Their participation will focus on advocating for SRHR, gender equality, and reproductive justice in the global policy arena. Stay tuned for updates on their contributions to these key international discussions!



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