

REPRODUCTIVE SERVICES IN BELARUS

country report

Demographic situation

The end of the 20th century is characterized by the negative tendencies in the demographic development of the Republic of Belarus. Crisis in the economic, political and ecological spheres of the country in the 90 s affected the demographic situation. Population growth was replaced by its diminution. At present, Belarus faces steady depopulation process. In 1994 the population of Belarus made up 10243.5 with its annual increase of 8.9; in 1998 the number of population was 10093.0 with its annual increase of - 48.9; in 2000 the population made up 10019.5 with its annual increase of - 25.7, in 2001 this ratio was 9990.4 and - 29.1, in 2002 the ratio was 9951.3 and - 39.1, respectively.

Birth rates

One of the reasons of depopulation process is a sharp decrease of birth rate that is presently lower the necessary for numerical generation substitution level.

For the last 20 years, active reproductive groups are characterized by the following decrease: 15-19 years – from 8,3% till 7%; 20-24 years – from 8,0% till 6,7%; 25-29 years –from 7,0% till 6,4%. Overall birth rate decrease brought considerable changes in age structure of women giving births (age groups of 15-19 years and 20-24 years bear till 60% of reproductive load. During 1992-1997, the number of live births in the age groups from 15-19 decreased 1,4 times, in the groups from 20-24 years – 1,6 times, 25-29 years – 1,3 times respectively.

At present, there is a tendency towards one-child – family model, primarily because of financial and housing problems, parental apprehension about the decent future of their children. For the last 30 years, Belarus has endured structural demographic changes: decrease of children and youth share by 8,3%; increase of pensioners share by 5,1%; increase of the population of working age by 3,5% due to the slight increase of youth share by 0.5.

Death rates

One of the reasons of active reproductive groups share decrease is an increase of mortality rate for the last ten years: in the age group of 25-29 years by 33%, in the age group of 30-34 years by 22%, in the age group of 35-39 by 28%. Infant death still remains a serious problem for human reproduction. In spite of the fact, today Belarus faces steady decrease of infant deaths. For example, in 1995 child's mortality rate per 1000 live births made up 13,3; in 1996 –12,5; in 1998 – 11,3; in 1999 –11,5; in 2000 –9,3 of children under 1 year of age. In rural area, child's mortality rate is much higher and unsteady. For example, in 1995 child's mortality rate per 1000 live births made up 15,6; in 1996 – 13,8; in 1997 – 15,9; in 1998 – 14,3; in 1999 – 15,4; in 2000 – 12,0 of children under 1 year of age. One of the reasons of children's deaths under 1 year of age is congenital defects (4,6%), diseases of the respiratory system (13,8%), influenza, pneumonia (0,9%).

Despite steady decrease of infant deaths for the last few years, child's mortality rate in Belarus 2 times higher than in the developed countries. For example, 11,3% of children under 1 year died in 1998 in Belarus, in Japan, however, only 3,6%, in Sweden – 3,9%.

Belarus faces also so slight but positive tendency in maternal mortality decrease. In 1990 maternal mortality rate made up 21,8; in 1993 –20,4; in 2000 – 21,3 per 1000 of live births. This fact speaks about some improvement of living standards and application of modern technologies.

Sexual education of youth

Recent research (national research of reproductive behavior of the youth in Belarus, 2000 including) has shown that only 4,3% of teenagers and young people got the information of reproductive health from the doctors, 20% from their parents, 4% from teachers, 70,7% from their friends. Teenagers and young people consider their information level on issues of sexuality and sexual relations to be average. In 25-70% of cases, the first sexual experience is gained without contraceptives, according to the recent research. As a result, young people face unwanted pregnancy, abortions or venereal

diseases. All the above mentioned speaks of the low level of sexual education. There is no official program of sexual education at schools legalizing moral-sexual education for children. Though a recently issued practical manual "Safe and Responsible Behavior" by professor A.N.Sisaniv can be used as a basis for such a program working out. There are only several lessons on reproductive health at school. They are either conducted at biology classes or at classes of medical care. Pedagogical conception of school programs remains gender neutral. One of the reasons is that the majority of teachers were not trained on the issue of human sexuality.

Information level of young people on the issues of sexual educations at higher educational establishments also leaves much to be desired. At the beginning of 90s an attempt to work out a complex program on medical issues for students of non-medical educational establishments was made. The first version of the program comprising a special section "Protection of Motherhood and Childhood" was compiled in 1992. The section was delivered within the subject "Basic Medical Knowledge" in the State Belarussian University. In December 2000 the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Belarus approved the for pedagogical special high educational establishments.

Unfortunately, this program is used to a full extent in the Belarussian State University only. In the majority of high pedagogical educational establishments of Belarus, a section "Protection of Motherhood and Childhood" is usually either cut down or dropped out by realizing the program designed for 160 academic hours. It is closely connected with absence of methodical and educational manuals and qualified lecturers.

On the whole, the level of sexual education of children and young people in Belarus is low.

Abortion

Abortion is legal in Belarus. According to a presidential decree enacted on April 5, 1994, abortion can be legally performed by women's request up to 12th week of gestation. Hospitals can legally perform vacuum-aspiration within 20 days of gestation and an abortion within 12 weeks by women's request. Abortion can also be performed within 13-26 weeks but under medical conditions: when there is a serious threat to women's health, fetus has congenital defects, in case of rape, juvenile pregnancy, in case of a divorce, husband's confinement during pregnancy period of a woman.

Young women under 18 years of age can perform an abortion with written consent of one of the parents. All the necessary measures connecting with abortion are taken by obstetricians-gynecologists and midwives either in state-owned hospitals or in private clinics. In state-owned hospitals, abortion is performed for free, in private clinics, it costs from 30 till 100 dollars.

At present, abortion rate in Belarus remains high. Yearly, about 8% of women of reproductive age perform an abortion. In 2000 the number of abortions per 1000 women of fertile age made up 46,1. In 1997, the rate of artificial interruptions of pregnancy by vacuum-aspiration method made up 53,2%, in 1999 – 50,3% from the whole rate of abortions.

For the last 10 years, Belarus has faced an increase of abortions among young girls of 15-19 years of old: in 1994 6,2% of girls of 15-19 years performed an abortion, in 1997 – 9,4%, in 1998 – 11,9%; 49,1% of them performed even a second abortion.

In spite of the fact that abortions are legal in Belarus, only few women can do it in state-owned hospitals. Many women addressed to our Women's Education & Counseling Center and other women's NGOs with complaints about refusals to provide an assignment to an abortion in state-owned hospitals. The government pursues privately anti-abortion policy. Under the Ministry of Health Protection order, all women of fertile age of so-called "national reproductive reserves" are put in a special database and their rights to perform an abortion in a state-owned hospitals are actually violated.

Juvenile pregnancy

One of the most alarming and challenging problems of the quality of women's reproductive health is juvenile pregnancy, which often leads to abortions and teen childbearing. In 1995 the rate of juvenile pregnancy in Belarus made up 74, in 1998 – 67, in 1999 – 60, in 2000 – 54 per 1000 girls at the age of 15-19. Belarus faces actually one of the highest rates of juvenile pregnancy in the region. In Russia, for example, the level of juvenile pregnancy makes up 100 for 1000, in Europe 5-25 for 1000 girls at the age of 15-19. The high rate of juvenile pregnancy and abortions is a result of poor awareness of modern methods of contraception, the inability to buy contraceptives, the lack of family planning

education and the inadequacy of the healthcare system to meet the growing demand for sexual and reproductive health protection.

Contraceptives

In Belarus there are no legal limitations of the access to contraceptives. Young people under 18 years of old do not need their parental consent for provision of contraceptives. All types of contraceptives are available in any drugstore and can be purchased without doctor's prescription.

One of the reasons of high rate of abortions and juvenile pregnancy, as it was mentioned above, is absence of an official program that would legalize moral-sexual education for children at school, limited number of academic hours on the topic "Reproductive health" in higher educational establishments, and lack of highly qualified lecturers. Low living standards of the majority of population also affect the situation. The prices for modern contraceptives are rather high and not every woman can afford to buy them. Only 13% of the population of Belarus use contraceptives (for comparison, in Great Britain 81% of people use contraceptives, in Sweden – 78%, in Russia – 22%), according to the report of the UN representative office in Belarus About Human Resources Development.

Family planning policy

Protection of reproductive health is a constituent part of the first medical aid in Belarus and is provided by the system of Health Protection institutions. Provision of all kinds of medical services is based on the Legislation of the Republic of Belarus. Protection of reproductive health is carried out within the following documents: "The 1996-2000 National Plan of Action for Women's Position Improvement", a republican program "Women of the Republic Belarus", a state program "Population Health" for 1999-2005 years, a Presidential program "Children of Belarus", "Main Directions of Demographic Policy Pursuing taking into account economic development in the transition period". Ministry of Health protection has worked out several regional programs on reproductive health and family planning. There are consultations centers "Marriage and Family", centers on reproductive health and family planning in all regional centers and Minsk aiming at providing assistance to sterile married couples, promoting responsible reproductive behavior, and taking preventive measures against STDs.

In spite of all the above-mentioned actions and efforts, only a few people can enjoy good reproductive health because of poor awareness of human sexuality, inadequate or inaccessible services in the field of reproductive health, social discrimination, women's violation, limited possibilities of many women and young girls to influence their sex and reproductive sphere.

NGOs also contribute to the solution of the problem of sex education for the youth. Within the program "Equal to Equal", several trainings and seminars were conducted for young people and now the trained young people spread the information they got during the seminars and trainings among their friends and counterparts. Moreover, the UNDP has started a wide-scale program on reproductive health of the youth in Belarus.

Legal provisions concerning equality between men and women

Under the radical transformation of political and economic systems of the country, to already existing problems reflecting women's discrimination in the main spheres of life, are added some new problems: hard working load, worsening of working conditions, low economic conditions in the families headed by women, women's unemployment, women's under representation in the executive and legislative powers, women's violation in families.

To solve the above stated problems, the second National Plan of Action on Gender Equality for the years 2001-2005 was worked out and ratified by the Cabinet of Ministers in May 2001. The plan aims to lessen the gap between the legal and actual equality of men and women. The first section of the plan includes actions connecting with the ratification of several international documents, consideration the possibility of ratification of the Convention of International Labour Organization 1981/156 "About Equal Opportunities for Working Men and Women", ratification of the Convention of the International Labour Organization 2000/183 "About reconsideration of the 1952 Convention about motherhood protection", and working out of a draft law about equal opportunities.

To promote women's status, Belarus undertakes certain obligations on the international level. Under Presidential decree enacted on 9 August 2001, permanent representative of the Republic of Belarus to

the UN S.S. Ling was empowered to sign an Optional protocol to the UN Convention on the Liquidation of All forms of Discrimination against Women.

This year a draft law "About Gender Equality" was included in the plan of draft laws working out for 2004. This draft law will specify possible forms of discrimination, determine what actions violate equal possibilities of men and women and introduce the mechanisms of the law provisions realization.

Women's NGOs also positively influence on women's social status promotion and gender equality policy realization. Cooperation with women's NGOs is carried out in the following directions: support of women's initiatives in the sphere of practical realization of the national gender policy, introduce their views to the government, provide various information, consulting services, and render financial aid.

Information about the organization

Civic organization "Women's Independent Democratic Movement" (CO "WIDM") was founded as an NGO by the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Belarus on 27 January 1993.

Main goals are: protection of women's rights; realization of the policy of gender equality; democratization of society.

Objectives: increasing of women's competitiveness in political, civic and economic activity; development of women's movement in Belarus; realization of cultural transformation of sights on the women's role in the society; protection of reproductive rights of women.

Main directions of the activities: education, research, information and publishing, counseling.

Recommendations:

- Create a system of sexual education for children and youth;
- Take concrete measures to create favorable conditions for women to fulfill their reproductive function;
- Provide contraception for free;
- Introduce legislation that would stimulate both parent to take maternity leaves;
- Assist in the creation of an effective political and civic education for women;

Why do we need donors' help?

As Belarussian government does not provide any support to NGOs, women's including, and even steps up pressure on them, donors' help is necessary to carry out various activities aiming at finding a solution to the above stated problems.

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