



September 25th, 2013

The below listed members of ASTRA Network, together with the international human rights organization Center for Reproductive Rights, are writing you to express our deepest concern about the anti-choice civic bill proposed by the „Stop Abortion” initiative. The ASTRA Network is the premier regional network of non-governmental organizations from 19 countries of Central and Eastern Europe that work for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and gender equality. Given our regional and international expertise on SRHR, we are uniquely placed to critique this new initiative that aims to ban abortions in case of fetal malformation. It will be in the first reading in the Polish Parliament on the 26th of September.

The initiative would, if passed, seriously jeopardize women’s health, rights, and autonomy. Poland has already faced considerable international criticism for its restrictive abortion law and practice. If it were to restrict the grounds for abortion further, Poland would stand out even more in Europe and its abortion law would be the subject of even harsher international condemnation.

We therefore strongly urge you to vote for rejecting this law at the first reading. Further, we urge you, in any future discussions about abortion legislation, to guarantee that any law with bearing on women’s sexual and reproductive health respect women’s rights and include protection for informed and non-coercive decision-making, in compliance with regional and international human rights and medical standards.

We observe the effects of the current Polish law on abortion with great concern. It is one of the most restrictive abortion laws in Europe, putting women in situations of great vulnerability with grave consequences for their lives and health. This system leads to violations of women’s fundamental rights. Further restrictions will lead to even more severe consequences for women in Poland.

Every person should be treated with respect for their dignity and their right to life, health, self-determination, bodily integrity, privacy and freedom from inhuman and degrading treatment. In addition, every person has a right to make decisions related to sexuality free of coercion, violence and discrimination and has a right to decide the number and spacing of their children. Overwhelming evidence shows that bans and restrictions on abortion do not reduce the number of abortions performed, but rather force women to resort to clandestine, illegal abortions that are unsafe by definition.

If adopted, this bill would increase the number of women who find themselves forced to travel abroad to access abortion. Traveling for abortion depends on the ability to afford such a procedure, which primarily will harm the most vulnerable groups of young women and women with limited funds, contributing to considerable health inequities.

The draft bill would force women to carry pregnancies to term even when a malformed fetus has no chances of survival outside of the womb, or to give birth to children unable to survive more than a few hours or days. Forcing women to carry to term nonviable pregnancies causes unbelievable, unnecessary suffering that has been characterized as inhumane and degrading treatment by international human rights bodies. Poland is obliged, under its human rights commitments, not to subject anybody to such treatment.

Human rights standards require Poland to expand women's reproductive rights, not to restrict them even further. The negative effects on women's rights caused by the deeply flawed current abortion regime has been observed, among others, by the European Court of Human Rights, the UN Special Rapporteur on the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, the UN Committee on Eliminating All forms of Discrimination Against Women and a number of UN States during the Universal Periodic Review.

On behalf of ASTRA Network we urge members of the Polish Parliament to act with a true care for women's lives and health and to reject the draft bill on abortion in the first reading.

Center for Reproductive Rights, USA (affiliate)
A.L.E.G., Romania
Latvia's Association for Family Planning and Sexual Health, Latvia
Family Planning and Sexual Health Association, Lithuania
Society Without Violence NGO, Armenia
Gender Alternatives Foundation, Bulgaria
Euroregional Center for Public Initiatives, Romania
AnA - Society for Feminist Analysis, Romania
Women and Modern World Center, Azerbaijan
East European Institute for Reproductive Health, Romania
Association for Emancipation, Solidarity and Equality, Macedonia
SALUS Charitable Foundation, Ukraine
Novgorod Gender Centre, Russian Federation
Women's Rights Center, Armenia
Women's Independent Democratic Movement, Belarus
Gender, Education and Research Technologies, Bulgaria
Women Health and Family Planning Foundation, Ukraine
Center for Population and Development, Albania
Women Center, Georgia
Reproductive Health Training Center, Moldova
Association for Population and Development, Russian Federation
H.E.R.A. – Health Education and Research Association, Macedonia
Bulgarian Family Planning and Health Association, Bulgaria
Women's Resorce Center, Armenia
NGO „Sana Sezim”, Kazachstan
Demetra Association, Bulgaria