



A S T R A N E T W O R K

ASTRA - Central and Eastern European Women's Network for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

Advocate's Tool No. 3:

Breaking the Silence

Synopsis

"Breaking the Silence" presents the stories of women from Poland, Georgia, Moldova, and the Ukraine, and the situation in Lithuania and Slovakia, bravely exposing the widespread and relentless violations of sexual and reproductive rights in Central and Eastern Europe. The film sheds new light on the personal experiences and the appalling and unnecessary harms suffered by everyday women and young girls in seeking reproductive health care. In many of these countries women found that, rather than experiencing the freedom that democracy promised after the fall of communism, their rights have become progressively more and more restricted.*

Poland

"In 2000, I became pregnant for the third time. Any rapid movement could cause my retina to fall off. I could be completely blind. A doctor certified that giving birth constituted an ophthalmological and gynecological threat. I took this certificate to the hospital in Warsaw.

There was a professor there who denied the abortion without any consultations, and destroyed the document. There was no time to get a second certificate – three months had passed. So I had the baby and soon had an eye hemorrhage. I could barely see. I ended up in the same hospital as before. I sought justice in Polish courts, but they were treating me like I was the accused and not the victim. So I decided to file a suit at the European Court of Human Rights. I had 68 catholic organizations against me...**but none of them ever asked me if I needed any help**, although I require assistance to live."

It is estimated that between 80,000 and 200,000 illegal abortions are performed each year, some in very unsafe conditions which lead to needless deaths.

Slovakia

Looking to the EU

"For the future of conscious motherhood in Slovakia, we hope for an EU breakthrough, which would result in a uniform law, giving women access not only to abortions, but to all medical services. Women are more conscious today, they know how to defend their freedom, and **will never agree to assume the roles they played in the Middle Ages.**"

Ukraine

A mother's plight

"I was pregnant with my second child, and the whole thing repeated. The same discrimination, the same dismissive attitude during labour. It was a premature baby. Instead of prolonging the pregnancy, they stimulated quicker labour, and dropped the baby on the floor during delivery. In the hospital, the doctor came out and said: **'We don't accept the AIDS babies.'** She turned around and walked away. I took my sick child home."

According to UNAIDS, Ukraine remains the worst-affected HIV/AIDS country in Europe. The annual number of newly reported HIV cases continues to rise and exceeded 12,400 in 2004, almost 25% more than the 10,000 cases diagnosed in 2003 and almost double the number diagnosed in 2000. (ASTRA Report to the EU on SRHR in Central Europe, 2005)

Georgia

"This is our tradition. The girl who is getting married must be a virgin. In rural areas, this is still very important. **There have been cases of fathers killing their daughters for this reason.**"

"In Georgia, girls who are not virgins are stigmatized. Sometimes they are forced to change schools, jobs, even to move."

Moldova

Trapped between the past and the future

"I wasn't even 15 when I got pregnant, and I didn't know about the child until I felt its first movements.

In school, **we had no classes about how to prevent pregnancy or AIDS and other diseases.**

I heard about contraceptives from my mom, after I already had the baby. If lessons about sex were compulsory in school, it would be much better."

"We are trapped between the past and the future. We want what's new, but are burdened with the old. We have our work cut out for us, especially teaching young people about their rights."

Lithuania

The strength of the women's movement in the face of opposition

"During the Soviet era, women in Lithuania had access to abortion. [This kind of access] ended when the country regained freedom. In certain cases, abortion is available at a price of around 40 euros. This is a lot, especially for low income women. But the women's movement in Lithuania is only just gathering strength. We are happy to see more and more women understanding that it is their right."

Contraceptives, especially birth control pills, are expensive in Lithuania, ranging from \$2.50 to \$5.00 and more. One condom costs between \$0.25 and \$1.25. As of 1999, the average monthly Lithuanian salary was \$270. The government does not subsidize contraception. (Center for Reproductive Rights Shadow Report to CEDAW, 2000)

* All quotes are from **Breaking the Silence**.

For more information...

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