



OSCE

HDIM Meeting, 30 September 2015 (Warsaw)

Let women decide over their body

Madame Chairperson,

Distinguished Representatives,

I would like to raise your attention on an issue of concern for humanists, on a fundamental right that remains unprotected in several participating States and that is increasingly threatened in others, as a consequence of a widespread bias against individual behaviours that, in the eyes of many politicians, are not consistent with the ethical prescriptions and belief of the alleged majority of the population: the right for every woman to decide over her body and to terminate a pregnancy.

As we speak, abortion right is threatened in several countries where it is legal. In Spain, the Parliament just passed a law removing any legal possibility to abort for the 10% of vulnerable young women who need to abort without parental consent. In Portugal, women will now have to go under psychological and social counselling, possibly given by conscientious objectors, before having an abortion. In Italy and Poland, although abortion is legal under certain circumstances, many women still face difficulties in finding a doctor because of governments' failure to regulate conscientious objection in medical care.

As humanists, we are worried about these developments and, of course, about the persistence of restrictive abortion laws in other countries. Not only because we deeply believe in every woman's fundamental right to refuse a parental project. But also because restrictive abortion laws, by violating women's various rights, consider them as second-class human beings.

Restricting abortion right is first and foremost a violation of women's right to life. According to the World Health Organisation, 13% of maternal mortality is directly due to unsafe abortions. Every day, approximately 800 women die from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth. Every year, about 5 millions of women suffer from temporary or permanent disabilities as a direct result of unsafe procedures.

Denying safe and legal abortion is also a clear breach in women's fundamental rights to health, right which includes their sexual and reproductive health as agreed by the 189 governments at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. Women have been recognized the freedom to decide if, when and how often to reproduce. It's high time to put this in practice.

Denying safe and legal abortion to women may lead to situations that constitute cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, as it was recognized by the UN Human Rights Committee. These situations include forcing a pregnant woman to carry an unwanted or health-threatening pregnancy to term.

Denying an abortion to women also clearly contradicts the protection of gender equality that governments are legally bound to promote. Abortion is a medical procedure that only women need. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women affirmed that the denial of medical procedures only women need is a form of discrimination against women.

The OSCE clearly recommended to the participating States to protect and promote the health of women and girls (Maastricht, 2003) and also repeatedly recommended them to ensure that no one is subjected to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. As part of its long-standing commitment to defend gender equality and non-discrimination, the OSCE has further recommended the participating States to comply with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) or to consider acceding to the Convention.

The European Humanist Federation would like to remind OSCE participating States of their commitment to protect these rights. We recognize that the practice of abortion can go against some people's conscience and religious beliefs. However, no one is forced to terminate a pregnancy. And these beliefs should never put women's life, health and well-being at risk. There can be no balance between protecting a woman's right to life and that of an embryo or foetus.

We urge Member States to treat women as first-class citizens and to ensure them – both in law and in practice – legal and safe access to abortion when they request it. Finally, we respectfully call on the OSCE to include the promotion of abortion right – at least under certain circumstances – as part of its broad human rights strategy.

Thank you.

Warsaw, 30 September 2015.