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On abortion to FIAPAC October 2006 in Rome

## Women's right to abortion in Europe – the actual possibilities

1.

Abortion was one of the major issues at the UN's International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in 1994. 179 countries agreed upon the Cairo Agenda.

It was agreed that abortion is a

- public-health issue,
- abortions should be safe where it is legal.
- women have always the right to good post-abortion care .

Since then the abortion debate has toughened.

The US president, George W. Bush administration has stopped development-aid funding to NGOs that in any way to work on abortion, regardless if it is informing, referring, performing or lobbying the issue.

The American stance has had serious consequences and important project, specifically in poor countries, have been forced to close down.

At present, it seems like many, including EU countries and NGOs, feel forced to follow the US policy and are agreeing to the strong conservative agenda.

This is due to

- economical dependency on US, or and due to
- political or/and religious reasons

Following the Cairo agenda, many governments have taken their commitments seriously. In such countries abortion laws have become more liberal, and women have been given the right to decide on abortion up to Week 12 without restriction.

In Europe this goes for Switzerland, Albania

But it has also occurred in South Africa, Cambodia and Nepal.

In other countries worldwide women have been given the right to abortion on certain requisite

## 2. The current situation in Europe show us that abortion is a major concern for women in Europe

There are differences between the old and the new EU states.

The new once are often more sceptical of the right to abortion.

But at the same time they are having the highest abortion rates. We shall not underestimate the importance of the conservative and financially strong influence that comes from the Bush administration.

One reason to the criticism may also be that abortion in the former Eastern Europe was the only form of fertility control to which women had access.

But the considerable influence from Catholic Church also plays an important role. The Church was important to many people during the fall of Communism. This has strengthened confidence in the church

spills over to other issues e.g. sexual and reproductive health and rights.

In Lithuania, for example, a critical/negative perspective on women's right to legal abortion is accompanied by strong scepticism with regard to sexuality education and contraception counselling for young people. This is a threat to prevention of unsafe and illegal abortion. Where pressure from religious fundamentalists is strong also important contraception such as emergency contraceptives are seen as controversial. In some countries the pill has been branded as a method of abortion. In others there is a reluctance to make emergency pills easily available. But in ten countries in Europe Emergency contraceptive can be obtained without prescription.

There are in Europe countries where abortion is total illegal. In Andorra and on Malta, a woman can be sentenced to three years' imprisonment for having an abortion.

In Monaco, San Marino, Liechtenstein, Poland and Ireland, abortion is allowed only in case of

- danger to the women's life or
- where there is serious foetal malformation.

In Poland the law was changed throughout the 1990s.

Now that Poland is in the EU, the social and economic reasons for abortion have been removed. It is now almost impossible to obtain a legal abortion in Poland.

But there is widespread illegal activity. At least around 200 000 illegal abortions are performed

Recently the government in Polen announced a plan to make abortion even more illegal through declaring that life begins at conception.

Such law will make women criminals but also, morally, as murderers have an abortion, not only seen as.

It is very important to note that

Poland, Ireland and Malta have secured so-called moral exemptions from all future EU laws concerning abortions.

Such laws will not be applicable to these countries.

Women in Hungary have big obstacle to obtain an abortion. In 1998 Hungary introduced a two session compulsory counselling with a waiting period in between and with the purpose of persuading women not to have an abortion.

There is also a law saying that the state shall protect the unborn life. The law leaves the final decision to the health provider. It is easy to guess that they are sensitive to wishes to the government.

Portugal has since long time one of the EU: s strictest abortion laws that state abortion as a crime.

But it is during the last years they have started to prosecute and imprison those who perform abortions as well as

the women who have had an abortion.

But the law has no influence on numbers. Portugal is likely to have between 20,000 and 40,000 abortions performed every year. Only a minor part of them are legal.

In Spain the law allows the possibility of putting both women and doctors before the courts. A considerable number of such cases have been taken up in recent years.

### 3. Abortion with restrictions and obstacles that are not legally based.

Women have the right to abortion in most European countries, but with varying kinds and degrees of restrictions.

Women usually do not have an unconditional right to decide.

They are dependent on the stances of doctors or bureaucrats, who make the final decisions.

A decision that has impact on the rest of the women's live.

But can be forgotten by the doctor the minute when the women leave the room.

In some European countries there are legally imposed demands for

Counselling and mandatory waiting periods.

The waiting period in Belgium is 6 days, Germany 3, France 7, Italy 7days, Hungary has a system with two information sessions with at least 3 days between the.

In the Netherlands waiting time is 5 days, after 44 days have elapsed since latest menstruation. Before the end of 44 days determination of pregnancy is not legally regarded as abortion, but as menstrual regulation.

#### 4. Consequences of illegality

Restrictions and stigma create a market for illegal abortions that often are performed by

- healthcare personnel,
- sometimes by women themselves or
- by money-seeking bunglers.

In Europe between 500,000 and 800,000 illegal abortions are performed each year. Many, between 150,000 and 200,000, take place in Russia. Previously, Russian attitudes to abortion were generous on social grounds, But the last decade the Anti-Choice groups has gained influence over the Duma.

In 2003 the Russian Abortion Act was changed, so that abortion is now only possible in cases of

- rape,
- imprisonment,
- death of spouse
- serious disease, or
- if the woman had been removed of custody of her children.

In Russia many women die from complications following an abortion, the mortality rate in Russia is ten times higher than in rest of Europe.

#### 5. Abortion trips are common

In European and EU women travel to other countries to seek abortion. Also, doctors travel to work and perform abortions in other countries. The women's journeys are scornfully called "abortion tourism", whereas the doctors' are regarded as falling under "free movement of services and labour".

For example, every year, between 5,000 and 6,000 Irish women travel to the United Kingdom, and to the Netherlands.

Women in Ireland have in accordance with the ICPD/Cairo agenda right to information on abortion,  
as well as right to post abortion care.

The Irish law direct that the information to abortion seeking women must give advice on three options:

- giving birth and keeping the child;
- giving birth and putting the child up for adoption;
- having an abortion in another country and arrange that her self.

6. Anti Choice Groups infiltrate to fights women's rights to make decisions to have safe and legal abortion". I believe that is a more suitable label.

They are often high voiced and their strategy is to oppose and attack areas like:

- preventive efforts, sexuality education and services for young people in Europe
- gender equality and other rights, associated with sexuality and reproduction
- attacking homo, bi sexual and transgender persons.

Parts of their strategies is to work for

- more countries to obtain so-called moral exemptions, like Poland got from EU.
- Efforts are made for conscience clauses on sensitive issues to be given legal status and
- to splinter the EU member states' support for the Cairo Agenda, and e.g. to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF).

These conservative forces can found in many places:

- in specialised organisations,
- in some governments,
- and among individuals.
- They have active members in all parliaments in Europe
- They cultivate conservative groups and religious societies.
- They have individual EU parliamentarians who are close to the lobby and religious groups.
- In important political institutions. For example the Vatican State constitutes its extended political arm in the UN and EU.

One used tactic is to spread faulty information, such as that abortion increases the risk of breast cancer. Other methods include lies, insults and opportunistic alliances. The issue of prostitution is an important example on such alliances. They are involved in persecution of people and violence.

They are trying to give words new meanings.

- Abortion is called premature birth.
- Emergency contraceptive pills have, when they were given to raped female refugees, been referred to as means of forced abortion.
- They make attempts to besmirch the Cairo Agenda by calling it the lesbian and feminist agenda.

### 7. Is abortion a EU issue?

It is often said that abortion is not an issue for EU and the EU parliament. Those who argue along that line claim abortion is a health issues and therefore a national issue.

But a broad part of women's movement and others, see the right to abortion as a human right. It is e.g. in accordance with the human right to made decisions about the number and size of your family

It is of course also a health issue as it is said in the declaration from 1948

Some EU parliamentarians facilitated a year ago for the first conference on abortion in the EU parliament. It turned out to be an intense and important day.

EU is not anymore only a union for coal and steel. It has also to deal with issues concerning sexual and reproductive right, including the right to make an abortion without risking physical injuries or being labelled as a criminal.

Further, there is a, possibly growing, Anti-Choice Movement in Europe. Many large USA-based organisations have in recent years extended their networks and have opened offices in Europe, above all in Brussels. These organisations tend to specialise. Several of them have apparently neutral names that can easily be confused with organisations with a quite different agenda or with research institutions.

For example, the Population Research Institute (PRI) devotes itself primarily to spreading lies about the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), with the aim of undermining its budget, and to inducing the EU to terminate aid for sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Stop IPPF strives to halt the work of the International Planned Parenthood Federation, the global umbrella family-planning organisation.

The Catholic Family Human Rights Action League (C-FAM) lobbies at the EU, while C-AFRI is its counterpart at the UN.

The World Youth Alliance is a youth organisation with links to the Anti Choice groups.

Will the anti choice groups succeed?

No! Not if there is sufficient awareness and knowledge about what is going on.

This requires NGOs, politicians and governments to determine not to allow decisions that have already been made, and are central to people's lives and health, not be eroded or destroyed.