



EUROPEAN WOMEN'S
LOBBY
EUROPEEN DES FEMMES

To: **Hon. Beata Szydlo**
Prime Minister of the Republic of Poland

CC: **Hon. Jarosław Starzyk, Ambassador**
Permanent Representative of the Republic of Poland to the EU

Hon. Frans Timmermans
First Vice-president of the European Commission

Hon. Vera Jourova
EU Commissioner on Justice Consumers and Gender Equality

Hon. Vytenis Andriukaitis
EU Commissioner on Health and Food Safety

Brussels, 14 June 2016

Re.: EWL deep concern about the proposal to restrict access to abortion and maternal health in Poland

Your Excellencies,

The European Women's Lobby (EWL) wishes to express its deep concern regarding the current proposal to restrict even more the access to abortion in Poland which tightens the already very restrictive abortion law - one of the most restrictive in the EU. If adopted, this would mean a significant increase in unsafe and clandestine abortions which would turn into a major health threat for Polish Women and even a threat to their lives. The EWL calls on the Polish Government to reject the proposed initiative and to listen to the demands of the women's rights NGOs when it comes to abortion.

The EWL is the largest umbrella organisation of women's associations in the European Union working to promote women's rights and equality between women and men. EWL membership extends to organisations in all 28 EU member states and three candidate countries, as well as to 19 European-wide bodies, representing a total of more than 2000 organisations.

A wide range of Polish women's organisations have brought to our attention the current bill whose worrying provisions can seriously undermine the already very limited capacity of Polish women to decide freely on their own maternity.

The EWL is deeply concerned as the health of women living in Poland could be even more threatened due to the proposal to restrict access to abortion constraining women's right to early termination of pregnancy to only one assumption: if the life of the women is at risk. Currently, women in Poland are only allowed to terminate pregnancy in three drastic situations (when women's life and/or health are threatened, when the pregnancy is the result of rape, or when the foetus is severely damaged). But this new proposal is accepted, women survivors of rape will also be forced to give birth and women who discover that their foetus have no chance to survive the pregnancy will be forced to live with the misery of going on with the pregnancy for months.

The proposal would also increase the maximum prison sentence from two years to five health professionals who help to perform abortions. Doctors will stop to conduct several forms of prenatal testing, which are basic prevention measures for maternal health, as they are connected to small risks of miscarriage.



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The current abortion law in Poland is already one of the most restrictive in Europe, allowing women to terminate pregnancy only in three drastic situations.

According to the UN¹, restrictions regarding of abortion “infringe human dignity by restricting the freedoms to which individuals are entitled under the right to health, particularly in respect of decision-making and bodily integrity”. Furthermore, restrictive abortion laws forces women with fewer resources to risk their lives in clandestine and unsafe abortion practices. It is unacceptable that in the 21st century, a European country has a legislation which directly endangers women’s lives.

The EWL believes that it is essential that the Polish legislation takes stocks of all its International Commitments to ensure women’s full enjoyment of their human rights including their sexual and reproductive rights. Please, allow us to recall some of the international human rights agreements to which Poland is a party calling for the realization of equality between women and men and the full respect of each individual’s sexual and reproductive rights, including the UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action. Furthermore, on the 22nd anniversary of the Cairo International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and the adoption of its Programme for action, it is essential for all the parties to recognize and ensure the basic rights of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsible on the number, spacing and timing of their children, and to have the information and means to do so, including access to healthcare, legal and safe abortion, and reliable, safe and affordable contraception.

Europe should be leading the way on ensuring women’s full enjoyment of their human rights. In the last Council Conclusions on EU priorities at UN Human Rights Fora adopted in 2016, the EU stated its commitment to the full and effective implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the Programme of Action of the ICPD and remains committed to sexual and reproductive health and rights².

Polish Women’s organisations and throughout Europe have expressed their concerns about the situation in Poland through demonstrations and petitions, and more actions are foreseen in order to support Polish women, and give visibility to the demands of millions of women and men committed to equality between women and men. We hope that you are sensitive to these actions expressing the opinion of the population of Europe and reflecting the democratic functioning of the EU.

The EWL counts on the Polish Government commitment to ensure women’s rights and calls on the Polish Government to reject the proposed initiative and to listen to the demands of the women’s rights NGOs.

Sincerely yours,

Joanna Maycock

Secretary General of the European Women’s Lobby

¹ [Interim report of the Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health](#). 66 session. Document number A/66/254

² <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/02/15-fac-un-human-rights-fora/>