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|  | **Side Event of the**  **Anti-Discrimination Centre Memorial**  **13.15 – 14.45, Plenary Session Hall**  **September 28, 2016** |

**Reproductive Rights in Post-Soviet Countries:**

**Motherhood cannot be Imposed or Restricted by the Government**

*(combatting discrimination against professional women,*

*restrictions of labor rights for the sake of “reproductive health,” and*

*practices of forced abortion and sterilization of women from vulnerable groups)*

Even though OSCE participating states have declared their adherence to the principles of gender equality, the right of women to freely and independently realize their reproductive rights is violated in many of these states. In a number of countries, a woman’s reproductive function is viewed as her chief and direct obligation. This restricts her right to choice of profession. For example, Russia, Belarus, and other former Soviet countries have bans on many professions considered dangerous for healthy future mothers, even though there is no scientific evidence of this. Moreover, the right to choosing between a career and motherhood should belong to women, not the state. At the same time, similar restrictions are not in place for men, even though some jobs are obviously harmful to their reproductive health. Clearly, this concern about a woman’s reproductive health serves as a cover for actual discrimination, where women are assigned the primary role of agent of childbirth regardless of whether or not a woman wants to be a mother or prefers to find an interesting profession and career.

A woman’s obligation to bear children is justified by many patriarchal traditions, which are themselves frequently harmful to health. These traditions include crippling operations proclaimed by one religious leader in the North Caucasus as a means for preventing “female depravity,” since, according to him, women were created to “bear children and raise them. And circumcision has nothing to do with this. It doesn’t prevent women from giving birth.”

Human rights defenders are also concerned by a return to discriminatory traditions in Central Asian countries. These include bride kidnapping and early, forced marriages, rape and unwanted pregnancies, and birth at an early age. At the same time, opponents of abortion are loudly calling for a complete ban on the procedure, while the government of unrecognized Abkhazia has already banned abortion even in cases where a mother’s life is at risk. Concern about demographics and reproduction also masks homophobia, and discrimination against LGBTI people is based on a fallacious dogma about each person’s responsibility to go forth and multiply.

Meanwhile, in some cases women from vulnerable groups (disabled people, poor people, women from the Lyuli and Mughat Roma groups) are forced to have abortions and even undergo sterilization (particularly Roma women in Uzbekistan). In Russia, the rights of mothers from migrant families are cruelly violated: during police raids, they are separated from their children, sent to deportation centers, and frequently expelled from the country without their children. In 2015, an infant taken from his Tajik mother died under unknown circumstances, and this is not the only time that the consequences of separating children and parents have turned tragic in Russia.

**Women have the right to bear children if they want and to raise them. They also have the right to choose a different path in life. The rights of mothers must be protected, but a woman is not obligated to become a mother, and no one can impose a reproductive role on her.**

**Participants in the discussion include:** experts from Central Asia (Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan) on the topic of harmful traditional practices and restrictions on the reproductive rights of women from vulnerable groups; an attorney from Russia defending the rights of migrant mothers; an expert on the rights of women in Abkhazia regarding the abortion ban there; a female river transport worker in Russia who suffered from a ban on professions and who secured CEDAW’s recognition of the discriminatory nature of a list of “harmful” professions banned for women.

Participants will be offered refreshments

Russian/English translation will be provided