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<Commission>{FEMM}Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality</Commission>

<Date>{16/11/2022}16.11.2022</Date>

<TitreType>MISSION REPORT</TitreType>

<Titre>following the Mission to Warsaw, Poland, 02 – 04 November 2022</Titre>

<Commission>{FEMM}Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality</Commission>

Members of the mission:

Predrag Fred Matić (S&D) (Leader of the mission)

Arba Kokalari (PPE)

Karen Melchior (Renew)

Margarita de la Pisa Carrión (ECR)

Introduction

In the framework of the draft programme for travel by parliamentary committees within the EU for the second semester of 2022, the Bureau, at its meeting of 6 June 2022, authorised a FEMM mission to Warsaw, Poland, for seven Members plus the FEMM Chair, from 18 to 20 July 2022 (three days including travel time), to hold meetings on women’s rights as well as sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Following the coordinators’ decision on 12 July 2022, the FEMM Chair requested authorisation for the new dates of the mission to Warsaw, Poland, scheduled to take place from 2 to 4 November 2022 (three days including travel).

With her letter D(2022)26330, the President authorised the request.

Context

The objective of the mission was women’s rights, including sexual and reproductive health and rights, also in the context of the refugees fleeing the war against Ukraine. Being mainly women and children (90%), they are especially at risk.

Summary account of meetings

**Wednesday, 2 November 2022, 15.30-17.30 - NGOs, active in the field of women’s rights including sexual and reproductive health and rights.**

 The **Foundation for Women and Family Planning FEDERA**:

**Ms Kamila Ferenc**, Lawyer

 Kampania Przeciw Homofobii:

**Ms Mirosława Makuchowska,** Vice-Director & Programme Manager

**Ms Annamaria Linczowska,** Advocacy officer

 Aborcyjny Dream Team:

**Ms Natalia Broniarczyk**

 **Ms****Justyna Wydrzynska**

 Centrum Praw Kobiet:

**Ms Urszula Nowakowska**, President

**Members of the delegation** asked about conditions and limits to abortion, risks to mental health, and whether abortion itself could provoke rather than solve such issues, the dangers of abortion pills and lack of supervisory care, the “conscience clause”, the pregnancy register, curricula in medical schools, as well as concrete examples of “LGBT free zones”, statistics about femicide and insight into how the Ukrainian war has affected their work.

**The FEDERA** representative talked about the 22 October 2020 judgment of the Constitutional Court, which abolished one of the three premises for abortion, that of abortion where there is a “high probability of a serious and irreversible impairment of the foetus or an incurable life-threatening illness of the foetus”. This was the premise most commonly used before 2020.

Ms Ferenc also highlighted the “chilling effect”, as apart from the pregnant person, all around could be criminalised. This has the effect of discouraging doctors, amongst others, from even discussing the possibility of abortion, even when it is medically and legally justified. The representative pointed to at least six documented cases when women died due to pregnancy complications, which could and should have been avoided by abortion.

Furthermore, she added, a philosophy of “let nature solve the problem” can be very dangerous. Too often, women are ignored, making them wait, given false legal information during highly stressful times, rather than giving official refusals which could actually be appealed. In cases like these, FEDERA - if they find out - can act, mobilising media, lawyers, MPs, trying to enforce the law (including going to the European Court of Human Rights) but also informing the women about other possibilities, such as:

1. having abortion abroad (was also applicable pre-judgement)

2. abortion pills

3. legal assistance to use still existing abortion premises, e.g. threat to mental health (was used before judgement, but not as often as used now).

FEDERA also has created a network of hospitals etc. which would carry out the abortion procedure. This means abortions in Poland are still possible. However, official and therefore statistically recorded abortions are dwarfed by hidden, unofficial ones.

The representative noted the relative lack of education in abortion treatment, including lack of specialisation and scope. FEDERA organises medical conferences in this regard, with the latest WHO guidance. She added that curricula should be expanded in medical schools to cover abortion.

FEDERA talked about the pregnancy register and the possibility of its abuse by the police, government or even doctors. Miscarriages could be criminalised, with women interrogated on their actions.

Ms Ferenc noted that in practice there is no threat that abortion would be performed on healthy foetuses in the final stages of pregnancy, and that a 12 week limit to on-demand abortion would be reasonable, with longer periods for abortions in the case of rape or violence and threat to life or health. The lack of access to abortion is dangerous, and the use of administrative barriers and delay to prevent abortions is also a problem. If a foetus is impaired, forcing the woman to carry the pregnancy through to term is a form of mental torture.

Regarding Ukraine, FEDERA is active, helping thousands of women with consultations.

**Aborcyjny (Abortion) Dream Team** representatives said that of the thousands of women who have been helped by Abortion Dream team, many have used home abortion pills, whilst other went abroad, first of all to the Netherlands, which has no requirement to state a reason for the procedure nor provide medical certificates.

The organisation highlighted WHO guidance regarding the safety of abortion pills, and their relative safety compared to Viagra, whilst highlighting the differing degrees of autonomy allowed for men and women regarding their bodies. Furthermore, the representatives claimed that there can be no safe abortion as abortion is criminalised. Likewise, from a social perspective, abortion is dangerous when it is portrayed as something shameful - safety decreases with secrecy.

Their funding comes from grants, including from Belgium and the UK, as well as private donations from all over Europe. The representatives note that providing abortions requires significant funding.

The representatives noted that Polish doctors are no longer being well-educated on abortion, neither on the theory nor the practice, with Poland being “30 years” behind best practice. Abortions could and should be much more humanely provided. The organisation tries to educate Polish doctors and medical students. According to the speakers, the WHO says the most dangerous abortion method is the one most commonly carried out in Poland, rather than the safer vacuum treatment which Polish doctors are not taught.

The representatives also underlined their legal difficulties (Justyna Wydrzyńska faces a three year prison sentence for sending abortion pills to a pregnant woman), and their lack of confidence in having a fair trial, and the political nature of the justice system. One example of the latter being the role afforded to [Ordo Iuris](https://en.ordoiuris.pl/who-we-are) to represent the rights of the foetus, which the representatives claim has no legal basis. The representatives feared the broad definition of “helping abortion”, which could include giving advice.

The organisation has also helped over a thousand women from Ukraine.

**Centrum Praw Kobiet** (Centre for Women’s Rights) representative highlighted three messages:

1. Poland is far away from Istanbul convention standards

2. Poland lacks education about equality and violence against women

3. Some positive legal changes (such as the possibility of a violent domestic offender being immediately ordered to vacate the home, restraining orders being improved, the introduction of a “blue card” procedure), but fearing that these are introduced as a counterweight to terminating Poland’s signature to the Istanbul Convention

The representative explained that there are large gaps in Polish law and practice in helping women, such as the lack of women’s shelters, which also are rarely specialised. There is also a discrepancy between the relatively low (and declining) number of domestic violence cases, the speed in which “blue cards” can be opened and closed (even within one year), and the number of hidden cases. Success would be if the official statistics recorded these cases.

Penalties for domestic violence were also often light or suspended.

Ms Nowakowska also pointed out the link between violence and abortions. Some women are tied to their abusive partner due to unwanted pregnancy and have no choice than to carry on with the pregnancy and continued abuse. In addition to that, there is a large number of missing women. They are not found, but it is suspected that they were murdered.

**Kampania Przeciw Homofobii** representatives referenced the 2022 bill to restrict sex education. It creates risks for any school which wishes to invite NGOs to the school, have any kind of workshop or event. The bill is likely to become law in the opinion of the representatives.

They highlighted that the Minister of Justice is also the Prosecutor General, who devotes his personal attention to the LGBTIQ+ community. The SLAAP court cases of Bart Staszewski were given as an example.

The representatives also addressed the issue of birth certificates for transsexuals. A transsexual person wanting to change their birth certificate might have to open a case against their own parents, as the Prosecutor General had previously referred the matter of parental interest to the Constitutional Court.

The representatives highlighted a number of Constitutional Court cases, such the case of a printer who refused service to an LGBTIQ+ organisation, or an artist prosecuted for propagating a picture of the mother of Jesus with a rainbow round her head.

Regarding the so-called “LGBT-free zones”, which cover a third of the country (there are over 100 such decisions), the representatives highlighted the successful use of pressure from the EU (such as withholding funds) in this regard. The resolutions concerned are not openly targeting LGBTIQ+ people, rather LGBTIQ+ “ideology”. The organisation pointed to research showing that LGBTIQ+ people felt more suicidal, or were more likely to leave Poland.

**Wednesday, 2 November 2022, 17.45-18.30 - Adam Bodnar, former Commissioner for Human Rights**

**Members of the delegation** asked about differing interpretations of human rights, pressure to abort, support of pregnant women, the need for fathers to be responsible, parental rights, and hate speech also against men, as well as the “LGBT free zones”.

**Mr Bodna**r identified two areas of importance:

1. rule of law

2. shrinking space for civil society

Mr Bodnar pointed out that the Polish central government influences, via various means, the general human right landscape, including the control over the Constitutional Court, leading to the 2020 ruling limiting abortion access. There was also a strong impact on, inter alia, public media, the secret services, the Prosecutor General’s office, as well as weakened institutions providing checks and balance. Specifically for organisations supporting women’s rights, there was continuous pressure.

Mr Bodnar explained the notion of “discriminatory legalism” - “for my friends everything, for my enemies, the law”. This translated to hate speech to women’s rights defenders (“Feminazis”). Furthermore, there are no laws against hate speech regarding gender or orientation.

As to the second point, the government did not treat all organisations equally, including funding. Some tasks undertaken by NGOs, such as providing shelters, were essentially public tasks, but the chance of securing grants from the governments was slim.

Regarding the Istanbul Convention, he said, it had been referred to the Constitutional Court, where the matter remained “frozen”.

Mr Bodnar also noted that there was no Gender Recognition Act, only case law originating from the 1960s, and that hate speech was prevalent. There is no regulation on same sex couples: not only marriage, but even no recognition of partnerships.

Regarding the “LGBT free zones”, Mr Bodnar clarified that from a legal point of view, these were local government resolutions against LGBTIQ+ “ideology”, rather than against people. However, those resolutions can be successfully challenged in courts. There are nine cases of such resolutions being declared illegal.

Mr Bodnar also referred to the case law of the European Court of Human Rights, which made clear that it is a form of torture to force women to carry a pregnancy to term against their wishes in the case of foetal abnormality or rape.

Regarding differing parental rights, Mr Bodnar also pointed to the public good and the rights of children, noting that Poland had over 300 pregnancies of under 13 year olds, which sex education might have prevented.

**Thursday, 3 November 2022, 09.00-10.30 - Representatives of the Ministry of Health**

 **Mr Dariusz Poznański,** Director of the Department of Public Health

 **Ms Katarzyna Drążek-Laskowska,** Director of the Department of International Co-operation

 **Ms Aleksandra Saniewska-Kilim**, Head of the Family Health Unit in the Department of Public Health

 **Ms Anna Błaszczyk,** Counsellor in the Department of Public Health

**Members of the delegation** asked about the practical availability of abortion under the two existing premises, the criminalisation of medical personnel, the need for doctors to receive the best training, the pregnancy register and its practical effects (such as fear of registering pregnancies, thus disincentivising visiting medical facilities, control and access to data etc.), prevalence of under-age pregnancies, sex education, ensuring Ukrainian women receive care, as well as the current situation for transgender people. Members also asked for statistics regarding pre-natal care to be sent, as well as information on which NGOs and church groups the ministry was cooperating with.

**The ministry’s representatives** explained that the duty of the state was to provide safe quality health care to all, irrespective of gender or orientation, with special care for pregnant, children and the old - as such, there is universal access to health care. This included the rights of LGBTIQ+ people to healthcare.

The Ministry of Health must follow the Constitution and beneath that, the law, which is assessed by the Constitutional Court. The ministry’s representatives noted that abortion was legal in Poland under two premises, and that if a woman needed an abortion under those premises, it was her right to receive one - a right protected by an Ombudsman.

Medical personnel must provide services in line with medical knowledge and the law, and should not be afraid to base choices on their experience. There are standards and guidelines which should be followed.

Should a doctor or other medical practitioner not provide medical care in accordance with the law, including the right to abortion under the two existing premises, an appeal could be filed to the Ombudsman, who would set up a committee to assess the case. In other words, the right to abortion is a guaranteed service, within the limits of the law. If a hospital is contracted by the state to provide pre-natal care, it must do so, including abortions. If there is a threat to woman’s life, her life must be saved.

Regarding the so-called pregnancy register, the ministry’s representatives pointed out that there was a legal decision to pass all relevant medical data into said database, not just pregnancy data. There is no legal basis to monitor pregnancy or to track individuals, rather it is about updating IT systems, ensuring limited resources can be best allocated, priorities determined, and that there is an Ombudsman for Patient Rights who has the power to impose financial penalties and issue recommendations.

Responding to the issue of access to a patient’s data, the ministry’s representatives explained that access was granted in accordance with data protection laws and medical need. The register is not aimed at any specific group, and more legal information would be sent to the delegation.

Regarding Ukrainian patients, the ministry’s representatives underlined that they have the exact same rights as Polish patients in all respects, including regarding abortions, pre-natal care, psychological treatment, and the right to go abroad for treatment.

The ministry’s representatives also informed that they have no direct contacts with church groups, but there is an established cooperation with relevant NGOs and they are consulted when the ministry is preparing draft laws, which are always publicly available.

**Thursday 3 November 2022, 11.00-12.00 - Meeting with Representatives of the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy**

 **Ms Anita Czerwińska**, Secretary of State, The Government Plenipotentiary for social economy

 **Ms Barbara Socha**, Undersecretary of State, The Government Plenipotentiary for Demographic Policy

 **Ms Monika Szostak**, Director of the Department of International Cooperation

 **Ms Marta Marciniak**, Deputy Director, Office of the Government Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities

 **Ms Dorota Bojemska,** Chairwoman of the Family Council at the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy

**Members of the delegation** asked about the rule of law, SRHR, the Istanbul Convention, “LGBT free zones”, shelters for women, sex education including of boys and, the legal definition of rape being based on violence rather than consent, hate speech, especially as regards gender and orientation, and how women can best be supported through their pregnancies and beyond.

**The ministry’s representatives** explained the evolution of abortions rights in Poland from the adoption of the current Polish Constitution (1997) and the various judgments of the Constitutional Court (reducing the number of “premises” for abortion from the original four to the current two), underlining the notion of the rule of law and separation of powers. In this regard, the representatives criticised the politicisation of the court system, underlining courts’ independence and neutrality, and the attacks on the rule of law by the opposition. In this regard, the representatives noted that the current legal situation in Poland was that life began at conception, and that therefore the right to abortion is not greater than the rights of the child, notwithstandingthe two existing premises. Likewise, the representatives noted that the Polish Constitution guaranteed human rights, taking into account the Convention of Children and the need to protect children before birth.

They underlined that the Constitution was adopted at a time when PiS (Law and Justice, *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*) was not in power.

Regarding the situation of LGBTIQ+ people in Poland, including the so-called “LGBT free zones”, the representatives underlined that Poland is a democratic state adhering to the principles of the rule of law with a long tradition of tolerance. They explained that the “LGBT free zones” did not exist, having been a provocation created by activists who put up fake signs which had no legal standing nor approval from the local authorities.

Regarding the notion of Poland withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention, the representatives were clear that there had been no such official announcement, and that furthermore Poland had adopted numerous pieces of legislation (the “blue card” system, the immediate removal of a violent spouse from the home etc.) to adhere and go beyond the stipulations of the Convention. This has resulted in the number of domestic violence cases decreasing.

Regarding sex education and respect for women, the representatives gave the example of the “Beautiful girl” portal (<https://pieknadziewczyna.pl/>) aimed at girls and women from 16 to 25 years old, which *inter alia* explains about issues such as menstrual cycle, regenerative health care, hormonal problems etc. This portal also organises workshops, has its own Tik Tok channel etc.

On hate speech, the representatives strongly condemned the opposition and various NGOs organising large demonstrations where hate speech and disinformation prevailed, leading to churches being profaned and PiS premises being attacked.

Answering the question about how women can best be supported through their pregnancies and beyond, the ministry’s representatives said that there is an established network of assistance with church and NGOs providing help.

**Thursday 3 November, 13.30-14.15 - Members of the Intergroup on Women's Rights of Polish Sejm**

 **Ms Wanda Nowicka**, The Chair of the Intergroup

 **Ms Katarzyna Kretkowska,** Member of the Intergroup

 **Ms Hanna Gill-Piątek,** Member of the Intergroup

 **Mr Krzysztof Śmiszek,** Member of the Intergroup

 **Ms Barbara Nowacka,** Member of the Intergroup

 **Ms Anita Kucharska-Dziedzic,** Member of the Intergroup

 **Mr Tomasz Aniśko**, Member of the Intergroup

 **Ms Magdalena Biejat**, Member of the Intergroup

 **Ms Katarzyna Kotula**, Member of the Intergroup

 **Ms Małgorzata Prokop-Paczkowska,** Member of the Intergroup

 **Ms Joanna Scheuring-Wielgus**, Member of the Intergroup

**Members of the delegation** asked about how the Intergroup would ideally see the abortion laws regulated in Poland, the legal definition of femicide and rape.

**The Intergroup members** highlighted that in the Polish Sejm there was no separate committee devoted to women’s rights, rather, it was subsumed into the family and women’s rights committee.

The Intergroup members said they appreciated the attention of the European Parliament to these issues in Poland and the adopted resolutions.

Regarding abortion, the Intergroup members noted that the right to legal abortion did not exist in practice, especially in cases of rape or violence given the 12 week time limitation and bureaucratic obstacles, and that the situation had nothing to do with protecting life, given that it had resulted in the deaths of pregnant women. This has led to Polish women being afraid of becoming pregnant, as they couldn’t be sure their rights to life and bodily autonomy would be respected, especially as doctors could be reluctant to perform abortions even if legally valid under the two existing “premises”. Likewise, contraception was limited in Poland, in terms of availability (in small towns for example) but also knowledge (both of medical personnel and citizens). Furthermore, emergency contraception was a prescription drug, with no reimbursement of costs. In vitro treatments were also no longer reimbursed.

The conscience clause was also criticised, limiting women’s rights in practice especially outside larger towns and cities. Given the strict 12 week time limit on abortions, and the reluctance of hospitals to facilitate the procedure, the end result was hidden abortions. This year 107 legal abortions were performed; and several women died, because of refusal of abortion.

The situation vis-à-vis disabled children was also identified as needing attention, with mothers especially penalised by the government if they tried to work, and given little practical help and money.

Regarding the definition of rape (based on violence rather than consent), there had been an own-initiative proposal two years beforehand, but it had not progressed to date. For femicide, given that men were twice as likely to be murdered as women, the government claims that there is therefore no female specific problem to be addressed.

**Thursday 3 November 2022, 14.15-15.00 - Social Policy and Family Committee of Polish Sejm**

 **Mrs Urszula Rusecka**, The Chair of the Committee

 **Ms Teresa Wargocka,** Deputy Chair of the Committee

 **Mr Robert Warwas,** Deputy Chair of the Committee

 **Ms Ewa Kozanecka**, Member of the Committee

 **Ms Katarzyna Sójka**, Member of the Committee

 **Ms Bożena Żelazowska**, Member of the Committee

**Members of the delegation** asked if abortion ran contrary to human rights, the time limits to abortion, rule of law, withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, how to prevent and deal with domestic violence, and the provision of shelters for women, benefits and help for disabled children and their families, the cases of women dying because they had not received abortions when medically necessary, femicide, the “blue card” system.

**The Polish Sejm committee members** assured the delegation that Poland had not announced its withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, nor was there any such intent. They also rejected the premise behind the rule of law questions.

Regarding the abortion situation, they noted that the idea was to protect human life from birth to death, and that this should be seen as a model for the whole of Europe. In those cases where women had died due to abortions not being provided where there was medical need, the law was clear - abortions are legal in those cases, and should have been provided. The committee members regretted the politicisation of women’s pre-natal care. Every doctor has a duty to provide healthcare. The well-known case of Izabela Sajbor was an obvious omission of duty by the doctor, and the hospital was fined. A woman has the right not to get pregnant, but if she becomes so, the rights of the mother have to be balanced against the rights of the child.

Furthermore, the Polish committee members maintained that contraception was widely available in Poland.

Regarding domestic violence, the Polish committee members pointed to the “blue card” system, and the reduction in cases over the past years. The Polish legislation on combatting violence against women went further than the Istanbul Convention, with 90% of women saying they know where to access assistance in the event of violence. Also highlighted were Polish prevention programmes, with funding to local governments.

Regarding LGBTIQ+ rights, the Polish committee members underlined that there was no legal basis for the “LGBT free zones” and that the reporting of said zones was factually false. Furthermore, they pointed to the LGBTIQ+ representation in all walks of life, including political, and highlighted that homosexuality was decriminalised by Poland even in the inter-war period.

**Thursday 3 November, 15.30 - 16.30 - Members of Human Rights Committee of Polish Senat**

 **Ms Ewa Matecka,** vice-chairman of the Human Rights, Rule of Law and Petitions Committee,

 **Ms Joanna Sekuła,** vice-president of the Science, Education and Sport Committee (member of the Human Rights, Rule of Law and Petitions Committee),

**Members of the delegation** asked about Poland and the Istanbul Convention, about abortions and the fear of doctors to perform abortions even if legally valid.

**The Polish Senators** underlined that the adoption of the Istanbul Convention was a milestone; as such, it was a surprise when the Polish Minister for the Family announced on Catholic radio that Poland would withdraw. However, there seems to be no work being carried out within the government to effect such a withdrawal, and the Constitutional Court had been asked to rule on the compatibility of the Convention with the Polish Constitution. The danger is that the government will claim that Polish legislation is compatible and superior to the Convention, and so Poland could withdraw. To date, the Constitutional Court has not yet ruled on the matter. The Polish Senators underlined that there was confusion regarding the provisions on “gender”, a word which had become heavily politicised in Poland, often taken to mean a third sex and as such as threat to family - this being the position of Ordo Iuris for example. An alternative bill to replace the Convention has not been debated in the Sejm or Senat as there was a public backlash.

The Polish Senators also highlighted the dangers of pornography, of moving away from law based on Christian principles, and of the influence of violence in media.

Regarding abortion rights, the Polish Senators again explained the existing two premises for abortion, and the outlawed third and fourth premises. They underlined the falling birth rate in Poland, women’s fears regarding pregnancy and the “chilling effect” on medical personnel, and lamented “abortion tourism”. They pointed out that public opinion expected the abortion law to be liberalised, and there were discussions amongst the opposition on whether a referendum would be needed in this regard.

The Polish Senators also noted the poor access to contraception in Poland, poor sex education and that IVF was no longer reimbursed - although some local governments do so to some extent.

Regarding the “pregnancy register”, the Polish Senators feared a situation was like in some Latin American countries, where miscarriages could result in prosecution for clandestine abortions.

The Polish Senators also informed that the day before the meeting, a draft law under which an abortion would be treated as murder, sponsored by the far right, was rejected at the first reading.

**Thursday 3 November 2022, 17.00-18.00 - Mr Bogusław Świeży, Deputy Mayor of Przemyśl**

**Members of the delegation** asked about the help the town was receiving from the EU, the preparations of the upcoming winter and a possible new wave of refugees, about help to Ukrainian women, including raped women fleeing war zones.

**Mr Świeży** explained that Przemyśl (approx. 60 000 pop., granted the status of “saviour city” by President Zelensky) was not ready for the large influx of refugees. He estimated that 2.5 million passed through the city, with a total of 500 000 refugees accommodated in the city itself.

In February and March 2022, the main objective was to ensure that refugees, mostly women and children (90%), could travel onwards, as it would have been impossible to accommodate them all, with the exception of those who needed urgent (medical or other) attention, those exhausted, and those separated from others and using Przemyśl as a meeting point. The first refugees as a rule had plans - in the first train with 650 people on-board, only 25% did not know where they would go. But this would change and later only 25% would know where they would go further.

Mr Świeży noted that the city authorities knew that the refugees would be traumatised, and in need not just of food and shelter but specialised assistance, yet there was only one psychologist speaking Ukrainian.

The peak influx was 17 000 people in one day. There was a 15 km queue for the pedestrian crossing to Poland.

All actions were financed by the city government and international NGOs. Aid from the EU goes through the central government.

Originally, the plan was to have separate rooms for men and women and women with children, but the numbers of refugees and the cold temperature (-10C) meant that this was not feasible.

A special space with 70 separate beds and rooms for up to 260 women with children was created, and another space dedicated to the disabled, and another for pregnant women, for those with new-born children, for those with children undergoing treatment, as well as another for people who had recently undergone surgery. Furthermore, at the railway station a point for psychological consultations was set up.

Mr Świeży was unaware of any cases of sexual abuse occurring, but could not guarantee it. Likewise, he could not report on the issue of surrogacy or cases of raped women

There has been a drop-off in terms of numbers of refugees. The situation is currently better, but the winter will bring greater challenges.

Mr Świeży called for the EU to step up efforts to have a single refugee system, for greater help in dealing with trauma, and especially for the EU to prepare for a second wave of refugees.

**Friday 4 November 2022, 09.00-11.00 - Visit to Community Centre / Counselling and Assistance Centre "Plicz-o-plicz" (Hand-in-hand)**

 **Agnieszka Kosowicz,** President of the Board

 **Milana Pakhomova**, Caseworker, and other volunteers

**The Community Centre "Plicz-o-plicz"** welcomed the delegation, explaining their actions and showing members their facilities. The space was donated by a private company pro bono, and consisted of counselling areas (legal, psychological) and child-care areas. Staff were over 50% migrants.

Funding was mixed, the majority from large donors (Care International, the Norwegian government), some came from the city authorities, but none (in this case) from central government.

The staff stressed that refugees have access to the job market, social care, health care, education, but there were many practical problems, both in terms of language (while similar, Polish still had to be learnt) and also of bureaucracy (Ukrainian teachers had to be hired as teaching assistants, because teachers had to speak Polish for example).

Furthermore, the staff stressed that war exposes state weakness - for example, Poland’s poor quality of care for the disabled. However, there are positive signs and initiatives from the central government, such as the recent setting up of a working group and legal changes in response to the reported experiences. On the other hand, local services and governments were heavily overburdened.

The centre has helped 1900 people. Most such centres work on an appointment basis, but not Plicz-o-plicz, which is walk-in. Many cases were very complicated or extreme, without easy or straightforward solutions, many with disabilities or trauma. 95% were women (often pregnant) or children. Ukrainian speaking mid-wives were available.

An important aspect was the child-care facilities, with a dedicated space for up to 20 children (3 years up to 12 years old) overseen by Ukrainian speakers. This allowed case workers to efficiently help their clients, or simply allowed some parents to have a small break. Children were often not yet (50%) enrolled in school - access to school was guaranteed in theory, but in practice there were language barriers, as well as the intent, hope or desire of the parents to swiftly return to Ukraine. In addition, Polish schools were full. Those not enrolled could use online learning, but this was sub-optimal.

In terms of employment help, the staff noted that the first phases - where Ukrainians were hired out of a desire to help - was over. Now Polish language skills were necessary (not necessarily a bad development given potential safety concerns). The main barriers to employment were language and childcare, which was limited for the pre-war population and was now under severe stress, with the possibility of conflict and resentment from Polish parents.

Another aspect to be considered was that the refugees were living “two lives”, one in Poland and one in Ukraine. Bank account, family, education, fluctuating impressions of safety were all complicating factors. Some refugees could work online, physically in Poland, virtually in Ukraine; some got money from Ukraine, often from husbands serving in the Ukrainian military. Some returned to Ukraine, then returned to Poland again. And many Ukrainians volunteered, wanting to give back and help.

**Friday 4 November 2022, 11.30-12.30 - Meeting with NGOs active with Ukraine**

 Support Fund for Women and Girls from Ukraine “Hi Girls!”:

**Ms Olga Jabłońska**, Aid Projects Director

**Ms Joanna Mosiej-Sitek**, Operational Director of Sisterhood Programme

**Ms Beata Kopyt,** Social Projects Director

 Polish Red Cross

**Ms Monika Kolaj***,* Protection, Gender and Inclusion officer

 Folkowisko Foundation

**Mr Marcin Piotrowski**, President

 Global Empowerment Mission

**Ms Alina Kurska, Director of International Affairs, Global Empowerment Mission**

**Members of the delegation** asked about support for Ukrainian artists, about period poverty, about preparations for the new wave of refugees, assistance from the EU.

**Global Empowerment** **Mission** were in Poland since the second day of the invasion, and have helped 40 000 Ukrainian refugees relocate to other parts of Europe and beyond. Global Empowerment Mission continues to support Ukraine in Poland and also directly, rebuilding flats, hospitals and schools, bearing in mind that many Ukrainians wish to return home. Global Empowerment Mission now focus more on IDPs in Ukraine, and raises concerns about human trafficking.

**Hi girls - Foundation** was founded before the war in 2013, and is active in Poland and abroad. It currently focusses on Ukrainian women and girls, on emergency action, cooperating with small towns near the border, supporting authorities in organising aid. According to their representatives, it soon became apparent that Ukrainian refugees would stay in Poland for a significant time, and thus they refocused activities in favour of the long term. They have opened a centre in Warsaw where Polish lessons can be booked, psychological help is available and children can be looked after. They also support smaller organisations - big cities tend to be better organised than smaller towns and villages, but all are affected by the war on Ukraine.

Hi girls - Foundationalso organises influential Polish and Ukrainian women, including film directors, novelists and Nobel prize winners, in an effort to raise support. Likewise they cooperate with other stakeholders especially Ukrainian ones, and avoid duplicating central and local government efforts.

The representatives raise the issue of period poverty, a real problem especially given that it remains a taboo, and few organisations focus on this.

In the long term, they call for greater support to provide psychological treatment, and refer to the efforts in the former Yugoslavia which continue even now, decades after the wars. In this regard, a shortage of Polish and Ukrainian speaking psychologists is worrying, especially as it seems that Ukrainians have a cultural aversion to seeking this sort of help.

**Polish Red Cross** is the biggest humanitarian organisation in Poland, with a mission of mitigating human suffering irrespective of gender and orientation. They focused on humanitarian aid, especially period poverty, but now are changing to longer term issues, such as psychological counselling, Polish language classes, child care, professional activation, etc.

They do not deal with gender-based violence per se, but have referred such cases onwards.

They underline that creating a complaint mechanism is very important, in order to both receive feedback and empower the refugees.

**Folkowisko Foundation**, pre-war, organised music festivals in their town close to the Polish-Ukrainian border. When the war started, they pivoted to humanitarian relief (“this is our first war”), and were one of the first organisations from Poland to be active on the Ukrainian side of the border, providing food and medication in the queues waiting to cross. Of the nine border crossings, Folkowisko Foundation worked on four, and were often the first contact refugees had. Folkowisko Foundation explained that now the crossings were quiet, but they are worried about a second wave this winter, as well as issues such as trafficking and sexual exploitation.

Folkowisko Foundation now have warehouses in Poland and Ukraine, and distributed “life boxes”.

In addition, given that the Russian war on Ukraine is an effort also to destroy Ukrainian culture, Folkowisko Foundation try to support Ukrainian culture. They organise art exhibitions and concerts for Ukrainian artists in Poland.

***Conclusion***

The mission provided Members with very useful and detailed information about the practical experience of women and girls in Poland in terms of sexual and reproductive health and rights, also in the context of the refugees fleeing the war against Ukraine. This mission and all the meetings provided a crucial input for the further work of the European Parliament on these issues.