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Poland was one of the first countries in Europe to grant women voting rights in 1918. It historically has had an active and vibrant women's movement.

However, in more recent times gender equality and the rights of women in Poland have come under serious threat. The UN Working Group on Discrimination against Women observed after a country visit to Poland that "the rise of religious conservatism questions some of the gains women have fought for."¹

As the Working Group points out, gender equality cannot be fully achieved without respecting women's reproductive rights.² Yet, access to reproductive healthcare services in Poland has become even more restrictive, and there exist significant gaps in sexuality and human rights education.³ Indeed this, despite commitments on education made under CEDAW including advice on family planning.⁴

The OSCE Ministerial Council Decision No.4/18 renewed the call to ensure access to justice, effective investigation, prosecution of perpetrators, as well as adequate protection, rehabilitation and reintegration support for victims of all forms of violence against women and girls.⁵ However, a report by Human Rights Watch published earlier this year⁶ finds that inaccessibility of government funding in Poland has led organizations to cut staff, diminish geographic coverage, and reduce essential services for survivors of domestic and other gender-based violence, leaving significant gaps in shelter, counselling, and legal support.

Moreover, threats from the Polish government to withdraw from the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, cannot but leave us with the impression that combating violence against women is not a priority issue for Poland.

It seems clear that in the area of gender equality and violence against women Poland currently falls short. We call on Poland, as an OSCE participating state, to reaffirm its commitment to gender equality and to the Istanbul Convention in full and demonstrate this commitment by drastic changes at home.

¹ The UN Working Group on the issue of discrimination against women in law and in practice, 13 Dec. 2018, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24018&LangID=E>

² Ibid.

³ <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/02/06/breath-government-my-back/attacks-womens-rights-poland>

⁴ CEDAW, Article 10, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/cedaw.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.osce.org/chairmanship/406019?download=true>

⁶ "The Breath of the Government on my Back," <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/02/06/breath-government-my-back/attacks-womens-rights-poland>