

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

PUBLIC STATEMENT

AI Index: EUR 37/5309/2016
09 December 2016

Poland threatens to withdraw from the Convention on preventing and combating violence against women

Amnesty International is alarmed by reports including statements by senior Polish government officials about the intention of the Polish government to withdraw from the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (“Istanbul Convention”).

“Withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention would constitute a retrogressive measure, which is a violation of international human rights law. Amnesty International is calling on the Polish government to respect, protect and promote women’s rights, abide by its international human rights law obligations and to immediately halt any efforts at withdrawing from the Convention,” said Anna Błuś, Amnesty International’s Researcher on Central and Eastern Europe.

The Istanbul Convention sets out minimum standards on prevention, protection, prosecution and the development of integrated policies to counter violence against women and domestic violence. Countries that ratified it are obliged to protect and support survivors of such violence. They must also establish services such as hotlines, shelters, medical services, counselling and legal aid.

Poland’s withdrawal from the Convention, which it has not fully implemented to date, would have disastrous consequences to millions of women and girls in the country and to organizations providing vital support to survivors of sexual assault, rape, beatings and domestic violence.

Police statistics show that in 2015 alone, over 69,000 women and 17,000 children in Poland reported incidents of or were found to have been subjected to domestic violence. However, as these statistics show, as few as 2,410 rape investigations were opened and NGOs estimate that only 15 to 30% of rapes are reported.

Since the unprecedented mobilization of women in Poland and their allies in October, which led to the Parliament’s rejection of a bill that would have imposed a nearly total ban on abortions, the government has consistently portrayed its policies as aiming to protect and improve women’s lives.

“Despite claims that women’s lives and best interests are on its agenda, the government is yet again demonstrating complete disregard for them. It is sending a clear message to

women in Poland: your lives, freedoms and safety are not our priority. Instead of protecting women's rights, the government is planning to remove a vital safeguard. What message does this send to perpetrators?" said Anna Błuś, Amnesty International's Researcher on Central and Eastern Europe.

Withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention would be yet another blow to human rights protections by the Polish government, which, for over a year, has mounted attacks on, for instance, the rule of law, sexual and reproductive rights, and freedom of assembly. It would be an unprecedented step as no Council of Europe Member State has ever withdrawn from the Convention and it could have damaging consequences beyond Poland.

Background

The Istanbul Convention was adopted by all 47 Council of Europe Member States on 11 May 2011 and entered into force on 1 August 2014. It is the first European treaty specifically targeting violence against women and domestic violence. To date, the Convention has been signed by the vast majority (43) of Council of Europe Member States and ratified by 22 of them. No state has ever withdrawn from it. The implementation of the Convention is monitored by an independent expert body, the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO), as well as the Committee of the Parties to the Council of Europe. Poland ratified the Istanbul Convention in April 2015, following extensive advocacy and campaigning by Polish NGOs. It made a declaration that the Convention shall only be applied in accordance with the Polish Constitution, which other governments opposed as they considered it incompatible with the object and purpose of the Convention.

END/