

# One step forward, two steps back: discussions on sexual / reproductive rights in Belarus

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Different aspects of women's reproductive rights are brought up in the public space to one extent or another. Last year discussion of the Law on Reproductive Technologies turned out to be such an event. During the last month the general public was stirred up by the amendments to the Law on Public Health that were directly related to the women's reproductive rights. At that, the level of discussions on sexual/reproductive rights reminds me of going around in circles: a woman is still not regarded as human in flesh and blood taking a decision in certain social, economic and cultural situation.

In my turn, I am interested in the following questions: What are the reproductive rights of a contemporary Belarussian woman? Does she stand assured of these rights? Who has a legitimate right to control a woman's body, to provide or to limit her access to the reproductive rights? Is motherhood a duty or a right for the woman?

A number of different sources are the empirical material for this study, first, the state laws and by-laws, second, the articles published in the state newspapers, such as *Soviet Belorussia* (*Sovetskaya Belorussia*, 213 articles), *Medical Herald* (*Meditsynski Vestnik*, 177 articles), *Teachers' Newspaper* (*Nastaunitskaya Hazeta*, 52 articles) published from 1991 to 2012. Third, in the framework of our research we have studied the learning aids and methodological guides covering various aspects of reproductive health and sexuality (46 specialized books published in 1991-2011).

## **Politicians: *Woman is granted a right to take a decision regarding motherhood by herself***

To the fullest extent the development of the national reproductive policy took place after 2000 when a majority of laws on family and demographic policy, motherhood protection, directly related to reproduction, were adopted.

In Belarussian law reproductive rights is a possibility for all married couples and individual persons to freely take a decision regarding a number of the children, time between their births and to have information and resources sufficient for that.<sup>2</sup>

Reproductive freedom interpreted as freedom of reproductive choice is the core notion of the reproductive right concept. Correspondingly, reproductive rights at the same time protect the woman's right to independently and freely be in charge of her body and its reproductive functions. At the very least, the reproductive rights are related to awareness-raising among youth, motherhood protection, legalization and development of contraception and new reproductive technologies.

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<sup>1</sup> Law of the Republic of Belarus of June 18, 1993, No. 2435-XII "On Public Health", Article 27. Available at: <http://pravo.by/main.aspx?guid=3871&p0=v19302435&p2={NRPA}>.

<sup>2</sup> Law of the Republic of Belarus of January 4, 2002, No. 80-3 «On Demographic Security of the Republic of Belarus», Article 1. Available at: <http://www.pravo.by/main.aspx?guid=3871&p0=H10200080&p2={NRPA}>.

In Belarus, women are guaranteed health care and in-patient treatment in the state health care institutions generally as women as well as during pregnancy, delivery and postnatal period. There are the norms for reproductive health care services in the area of labor, such as restrictions or prohibitions regarding certain types and forms of labor for all women as well as pregnant women and women with children, creation of environment necessary to combine motherhood, care for house, family and employment duties (privileges regarding vacations, social vacations and benefits, guarantees regarding the right to work, establishment of the system of children's institutions, household-related infrastructure). At that, parental leave to attend a child up to the age of three can be taken also by a father or other relatives.<sup>3</sup> Abortions and contraception have always been legal. Induced termination of pregnancy is carried out at will of a woman at 12 weeks. Abortion can be carried out at the later stage of pregnancy due to social or medical indications.<sup>4</sup>

Besides, the following forms of the assisted reproductive technologies are legalized in the country<sup>5</sup>:

*Artificial insemination* – a form of the assisted reproductive technologies involving artificial vaginal insemination.

*Surrogate motherhood* – a form of the assisted reproductive technologies involving association of sperm with an egg taken from the genetic mother's body, or donor egg cell, outside of a woman's body, followed by the development of an embryo and its transfer into a uterus of a surrogate mother who bears and gives birth to a child. Surrogate motherhood was legalized in the country in 2006 by amending the Code on marriage and family and by adoption a number of laws.

*Extracorporal fertilization* – a form of the assisted reproductive technologies involving sperm-egg association outside of the woman's body, followed by the development of an embryo and its transfer into the mother's uterus.

So formally the state does implement a certain policy supporting women in their desire to have or not to have children. However, first, the vested norms are not always implemented in practice, and, second, they are often contested by the state and other public space entities. Existence of the legal norms regarding the reproductive rights regulate only access to certain services and facilities but do not deal with the social relations and a position of women in the society. In the Belarussian society the woman is still viewed primarily as a mother and a 'protectress of the family hearth'. Correspondingly a number of the women's reproductive rights are contested from time to time by the society.

### **(Neo)conservative ideology and moral rhetoric: "Motherhood is the main mission of the woman"<sup>6</sup>**

In spite of the vested right of the woman to the free and independent reproductive choice the state policy is still based upon the traditional morality within which each woman's body is perceived as implicitly the mother's body. Motherhood appears as the 'natural' destination of the woman and ultimate expression of her femininity, the only 'normal' version of her life target. Women are vested with the responsibility for existence of the state, nation and the society. Correspondingly support of this system requires enforced control over the woman's body both by introducing the specific legal norms and by using the moral rhetoric. Implementation of the declared norms and reproductive rights faces among other issues the moral barriers.

<sup>3</sup> Law of the Republic of Belarus of June 18, 1993, No. 2435-XII "On Public Health", Article 24. Available at: <http://pravo.by/main.aspx?guid=3871&p0=v19302435&p2={NRPA}>.

Labor Code of the Republic of Belarus: of July 26, 1999, No. 296-3. As of January 17, 2011. Minsk: Amalfea, 2011. Articles 14, 16, 120, 166, 168, 183-185, 189, 262-269.

Law of the Republic of Belarus of December 29, 2012, No. 7-3 «On the state subsidies provided to the families with children». Available at: <http://rebenok.by/inf/state/18201-zakon-respubliki-belarus-o-gosudarstvennykh-posobiyakh-semyam-vospityvayushchim-detei.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Law of the Republic of Belarus of June 18, 1993, No. 2435-XII "On Public Health", Article 27. Available at: <http://pravo.by/main.aspx?guid=3871&p0=v19302435&p2={NRPA}>.

<sup>5</sup> Law of the Republic of Belarus of January 7, 2012, No. 341-3 «On assisting reproductive technologies», Article 1. <http://www.pravo.by/main.aspx?guid=3871&p0=H11200341&p2={NRPA}>

<sup>6</sup> Lukashenko A.G. Napolnite Kazhdyi Den Mirom and Happiness (*Fill Each Day with Peace and Happiness*). In: *Sovetskaya Belorussia (Soviet Belorussia)*, November 13, 2007. Available at: <http://www.sb.by/post/61459>

In due time 2006 was announced the Mother's Year and in 2008 the annual holidays, such as the Mother's Week (October 8-14) and the Mother's Day (October 14), were introduced. In his congratulation in honor of the Mother's Day, A. Lukashenko indicated that *"Motherhood is the main mission of the woman on whom the future of the countries and nations, the development of civilization itself depend"*.<sup>7</sup>

The latest demographic program for 2011-2015 states: *"Reduction of a need in children, loss of families with many children as a national tradition have resulted in the fact that today a Belarussian family is usually a family with one child... In this situation one of the priority tasks of the demographic policy is to revive the importance of the family, family values"*.<sup>8</sup> This legal initiative produces reference to the moral rhetoric and ideology by manipulating a notion of reproduction.

All of this is happening of the back of the gender policy that has been implemented since 1996 and has been manifested in the adoption of the National Action Plans to Achieve Gender Equality for 1996-2000, 2001-2005, 2008-2010, and 2011-2015. In 2000 the National Council on Gender Policy was established at the Council of Ministers. However, the activities of this body constantly give rise to criticism of the gender experts because the Council is not an autonomous body and does not have the levers to influence the state policy. Also, in theory, the gender policy is aimed at liberation from the gender stereotypes and tight regulations regarding the role of women in the society. However, the plans themselves directly are aimed at assigning the role of the mother and the family institution to the women. For instance, *"strengthening of the family institution and family and marital relations, propaganda of the marital and family values, achievement of gender equality in the family relations, involvement of men in house labor and child-rearing"*<sup>9</sup> are a part of the goal aimed at achievement of gender equality.

Women are perceived as a 'reproductive potential' and 'demographic reserve'. In the official rhetoric, care for reproductive health is mostly perceived in the framework of care for the demographic situation and the gene pool of the nation.

*"Teenage girls are the key potential of the country that provides for the stability of demography, gene pool of the nation, and ultimately the future of the state"* (p. 140). *"The biggest value of the woman is her health. It gives her a possibility to give birth and rear children, to maintain the marital relations, to keep the house, to work, to participate in the social life actively"* (p. 171).<sup>10</sup>

Responsibility for increase in population is put on women and the state policy is aimed at stimulating their reproductive behavior. Correspondingly what is condemned is any phenomena preventing reproduction. For instance, the newspaper *Soviet Belorussia* has made the following statements:

*And this sad statistics is so annoying that it is getting really scary: who will need us when we are old? The population ages, the demographic threat is breaking loose from the tidy statistical columns and is taking some sinister meaning. And the eternal questions arise: who is guilty? What is to be done? The guilty have been identified fast; they are the women who have abortions (over 90 thousands abortions annually)"*.<sup>11</sup>

*"In the demographically disadvantaged country, such as ours, artificial termination of pregnancy should not be next to the most widely spread, and what is important, accessible surgery. This is clear. But now termination of pregnancy is a part of the state minimum health care system, there are practically no restrictions to it. What does that mean? It means that this surgery is quite accessible"*.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Lukashenko A.G. Napolnite Kazhdyi Den Mirom and Happiness (*Fill Each Day with Peace and Happiness*). In: *Sovetskaya Belorussia (Soviet Belorussia)*, November 13, 2007. Available at: <http://www.sb.by/post/61459>

<sup>8</sup> Edict of the President of the Republic of Belarus of August 11, 2011, No. 357 "On the National Program for Demographic Security of the Republic of Belarus for 2011-2015". Available at: [http://pravo.by/world\\_of\\_law/text.asp?RN=P31100357](http://pravo.by/world_of_law/text.asp?RN=P31100357)

<sup>9</sup> Ordinance of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus of August 16, 2011, No. 1101 "On the National Action Plan to Achieve Gender Equality for 2011-2015". Available at: <http://pravo.by/main.aspx?guid=3871&p0=C21101101&p2={NRPA}>

<sup>10</sup> Sidorenko V.N. Profilaktika Narusheniy Reproaktivnoho Zdorovya u Sovremennoy Molodezhi (*Prevention of Reproductive Health Disorders in Modern Youth*). Minsk: BHU, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Olhina P. Aist Priletaet Vse Rezhe (*Storks Come Much Less Frequently...*). In: *Sovetskaya Belorussia (Soviet Belorussia)*, May 30, 2003. P. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Habasova L. Bez Boli i Strakha Izbavit ot... Rebenka (*Without Pain and Fear Will Free You of... Child*). In: *Sovetskaya Belorussia (Soviet Belorussia)*. February 23, 2002. P. 21

Reproduction is closely linked to the woman thus creating the situation of gender asymmetry. In other words, the function of not only obligatory child birth but also their further upbringing assigned to the woman creates unequal situation for the women's position in the society. This includes the 'glass ceiling', difficulties with job placement, gender gap in labor compensation, and double load (work, home, family). Men rarely take the parental leave. The key responsibility for safe sexual behavior is also rested on women mostly.

The moral norms are transformed into the political tools of control over the reproductive behavior of women, characterize the level of reproductive freedom in the society. Primarily this is expressed by ideological assignment to women of the duty to produce new citizens for the state. It is this task that is repeatedly stressed in the legal documents, mass media and particularly in the statements of the country's leaders.

### Restrictions of the reproductive rights

Translation of the normative concepts where only the actively fertile body is legitimate puts in doubt existence of a number of the reproductive rights. Correspondingly what we recently see in the country is the attempts and direct actions to restrict certain reproductive rights. In particular, the reproductive technologies and contraception are subject to that.

For instance, the Law on Reproductive Technologies<sup>13</sup> has introduced age restrictions to use of the assisted reproductive technologies: *"in vitro fertilization and artificial insemination are not to be used for patients over 50 years of age"*. These restrictions are based not on the physical condition of a particular woman and her wishes but on some universal norm in accordance with which there is a notion of 'reproductive age', and supposedly when the woman reaches 50 years of age she loses her reproductive performance. Existence of the age restrictions brings a whole number of controversial questions on what reproduction is, what is its meaning in the national processes etc.

As for donorship, the requirement to men and women are different. For instance, the age restrictions are different and it is a requirement for a female donor to have a child:

- *"Men 18 to 40 years of age without medical contraindications to sperm donorship who went through medical screening can be a sperm donor"*
- *"Women 18 to 35 years of age without medical contraindications to egg cell donorship **who have a child** and went through medical screening can be an egg cell donor"*

In turn, only a woman who is married, 20 to 35 years of age, and who has a child can be a surrogate mother. Such requirements to surrogate mothers make the given right practically unachievable. It is quite difficult to imagine that a young married mother who has a child might want to become a surrogate mother.

Besides, the Ordinance of the Ministry of Public Health No. 15 on amending the list of the medical products sold without prescription was adopted on March 7, 2012; in accordance with the ordinance, oral contraceptives are now a part of the list of the medications that are to be sold on prescription only beginning with July 1, 2012.

The issue of contraception is directly related to the fundamental issues regarding how it is possible to control the reproductive process and who has a right to exercise such control. In this case the state claims this right. Woman that is regarded as the 'reproductive potential' and the 'demographic reserve' is forced to follow the order from the 'top' since she does not have a possibility to take charge of all reproductive rights. Moreover, introduction of such restrictions does not go hand in hand with the health care system reform. Many women face low quality of the provided services in the antenatal clinics, such as queues, offensive behavior, lack of attention on the part of the clinic managers etc. Besides, the level of contraceptive culture is still not high in the country. Against such background, the restrictive measures make access to contraception more difficult.

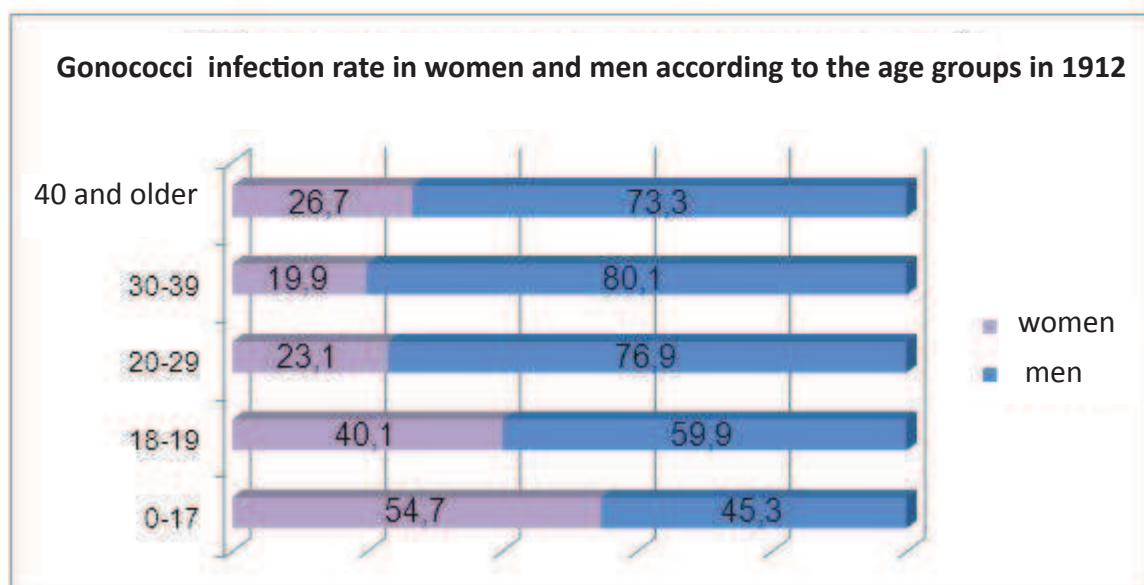
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<sup>13</sup> Law of the Republic of Belarus of January 7, 2012, No. 341-3 "On assisting reproductive technologies", Article 1. <http://www.pravo.by/main.aspx?guid=3871&p0=H11200341&p2={NRPA}>

In accordance with the results of the survey of the situation of women and children carried out by the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus in 2012, more than a half (63%) of married women or women who are in the unregistered relationships in the age 15 to 49 use some form of contraceptives. Unsatisfied need in contraception (to plan pregnancies or for birth control) totaled to 7%. That means that 7 out of 100 women of reproductive age are limited in their actions to plan pregnancies and give birth to wanted children.<sup>14</sup> In accordance with the 2010 data, 19.6% of women<sup>15</sup> use hormonal contraceptives even though 40% is considered to be the optimal indicator.

There are at least two barriers preventing free access to contraception, such as direct legal restrictions and lack of access to information, in particular, lack of sexual education.

As a natural result, teenage girls are a dominating population in the structure of STI morbidity. In 2012, women total to more than 65% among those who have been diagnosed with syphilis in the age group under 18 years of age. As for gonococcal infections, women totaled to 54.7%. As for the new HIV cases, in 2010 women totaled to 60.9% in the age group under 19 years of age.<sup>16</sup>



<sup>14</sup> Multiindicator cluster study to assess the situation of women and children. 2012. Preliminary Report. The National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Belarus, 2013. Available at: <http://belstat.gov.by/homep/ru/households/mics/results.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> *Zdorovye Naselenia Respubliki Belarus (Health of the Population of the Republic of Belarus)*. Minsk, 2011. P. 98.

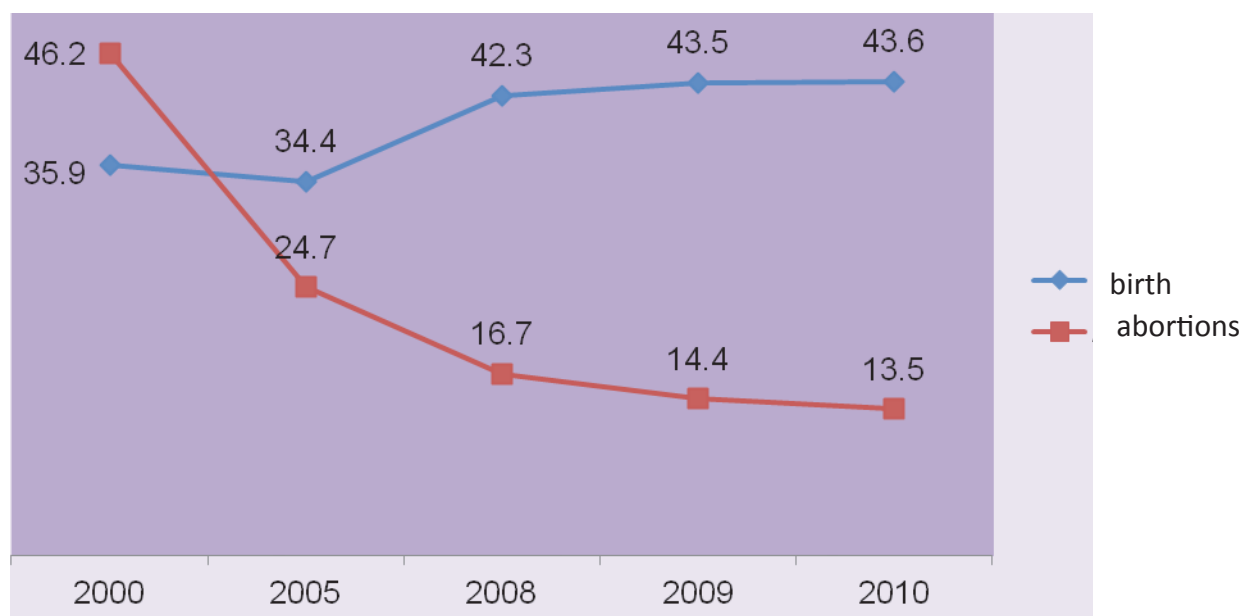
<sup>16</sup> *Zhenshchiny i Muzhchiny Respubliki Belarus (Women and Men of the Republic of Belarus)*. Minsk, 2013. P. 153-154. *Zdorovye Naselenia Respubliki Belarus (Health of the Population of the Republic of Belarus)*. Minsk, 2011. P. 36-37.



A need in legal abortions is regularly called in question in Belarus. In Belarus, artificial termination of pregnancy was always permitted; however, the official rhetoric demonstrated highly negative attitude toward it. Correspondingly, for instance, in its turn, Belarussian Orthodox Church and Mohylevsk Roman Catholic archiepiscopacy also suggest to amend the Law “On Public Health”. In this context they have submitted their proposals to the House of Representatives of the National Assembly. In particular, the question is prohibition of abortion and a number of reproductive technologies (in vitro fertilization, surrogate motherhood), sex-reassignment surgeries: *“Artificial termination of pregnancy (abortion) is unacceptable. From the moment of conception any infringement on life of a future personal is a criminal act... Artificial termination of pregnancy contradicts the principles of protection of motherhood and childhood... Modern assisted reproductive technologies do not conform with morality and are perceived as unacceptable as inconsistent with family values and traditions of a family – a union of a man and a woman”*.<sup>17</sup>

These proposals have never been legitimized but what is symptomatic is the fact that such proposals were initiated. Abortion is perceived as a reason behind the demographic crisis. However, these statements are purely populist. During the last 10 years, there is a significant drop in a number of abortions and growth of births in the country. Thus, in 2000 128.7 abortions fell at 100 births while in 2010 only 31 abortions fell at 100 births<sup>18</sup>

**Number of births and abortions per 1000 women aged 15-49**



This fact substantiates that permission or prohibition of abortions does not influence their number. The key factors are rather availability of the means of family planning, level of the development of the public health services, sexual education and availability of information. Possible prohibition of abortions will not result in improvement of the demographic situation in the country; to the contrary, it will result in a growth of a number of illegal abortions and as a consequence in a growth of female mortality, disability and traumatism.

The researchers describe the negative outcomes of the period when abortions were criminalized, in 1936 to 1956: criminal abortions were perceived as a norm in the Soviet society while a number of deaths of

<sup>17</sup> Resolution on amending the Law of Belarus “On Public Health”. Official portal of the Belarussian Orthodox Church, November 30, 2012. Available at: <http://www.church.by/resource/Dir0301/Dir0302/2012/Page4795.html>

<sup>18</sup> *Zdorovye Naselenia Respubliki Belarus (Health of the Population of the Republic of Belarus)*. Minsk, 2011. P. 99.

women due to sepsis grew fourfold.<sup>19</sup> In 1935, deaths from abortion totaled to 26% of maternal mortality cases while in 1940 this figure totaled to 51%. In the beginning of the 1950-s their share exceeded 70%.<sup>20</sup>

In the beginning of the 1990-s, the discussions on abortions were perceived as natural. Fall of the Soviet Union and rise of the nation-states logically required to revise the social policies. Many aspects were thrown into questions and reconsidered. Including the woman's right to abortion. Until recently there were not attempts made in Belarus to prohibit abortions. However, this question is again a part of the agenda. This is related to a unique revision of the role of the woman. Reproduction and sexuality are the political categories continuously included in the power struggle since reproduction is a necessary condition for the existence of the state. That is why it is women who are first and foremost controlled by the state, society, family, group. All continuing discussions about abortions are basically a concern with social transformation of the family and gender relations.

Rosalind Pollack Petchesky points out that *"abortion is the base for wider ideological struggle in which the sense of family, the state, motherhood and women's sexuality is contested"*.<sup>21</sup> The researcher indicates that the debates about abortions are a response to the change in the position of women in the society, increasing emancipation of women, and escape from dependency upon men.

The issue of the reproductive rights requires shifting the focus from the policy of restriction and prohibitions to the system of prevention and education of people regarding birth control. In our country there are still no program of sexual education for children and youth. The state supports hypocritical morality trying to legislatively pretend that there is no sex nevertheless appealing to the notions of family, birth rate, motherhood etc. What is the result of such 'moral rhetoric' are the practices of direct restriction of the women's rights in order to accommodate the family and demographic policy based on the conservative ideology.

### **"Sexual as Political"**

Issues related to sexuality are actively forced out from the public space. Openly homophobic rhetoric is commonly expressed by the official persons and structures. The state is not yet ready to recognize importance of sexual education openly; a need to conduct any interventions regarding the sexual relations is not legally covered in the active laws and by-laws adopted both at the level of the government and at the level of the Ministry of Education and the structures subordinated to it. However, from time to time the sections on sexuality appear in some textbooks on educational work in schools. But the interpretations offered by these textbooks raise serious concerns.

Women's health is linked in a certain manner to such issues as female sexuality and virginity. Role of these aspects in keeping up female health and position of women in the society is not always clear. Issues related to the female body and sexuality is still an area of omission in the academic and public discussions. It is not customary to talk about that in the wide public space. Such disregard and suppression are by no means care about women's privacy and her comfort. To the contrary, 'silence' regarding the female body is not an absolute silence. It is accompanied by the 'discursive explosion' on the demographic issues as well as various practices of regulation of the female body. Women's sexuality is not turned loose. It is regulated, normalized and controlled. What plays an important role here is the systems of education and health care. Behind what is seen as 'silence' is the numerous tools, strategies and policies that are seething and working.

<sup>19</sup> Leбина N. «Navstrechu Mnogochislennym Zayzvlениam Trudiashchikhsia Zhenshchin...» Abortnaya Politika kak Zerkalo Sovetskoy Sotsialnoy Zaboty ("Responding the Numerous Petitions of the Working Women..." Abortion Policy as a Mirror of the Soviet Social Care). In *Sovetskaya Sotsialnaya Politika 1920-30-h Godov: Ideologia i Povsednevnost (Soviet Social Policy of the 1920-1930-s: Ideology and Daily Life)*. Ed. by P. Romanova, Ye. Yarskaya-Smirnova. Moscow, 2007. P. 234-240.

<sup>20</sup> Sakevich V.I. *Chto Bylo posle Zapreta Aborta v 1936 Godu (What Happened after Prohibition of Abortions in 1936)*. In: Demoscop Weekly, No. 221-222, Nov. 7-20, 2005. Available at: <http://demoscope.ru/weekly/2005/0221/reprod01.php>

<sup>21</sup> Petchesky R.P. *Abortion and woman's choice: the state, sexuality, and reproduction freedom*. Northeastern University Press, 1990. P.xi.

On the one hand, sexuality is not an entirely secret topic in the contemporary Belarus. Year after year a number of publications discussing various aspects of sexuality is growing. There is no such severe censorship in TV and mass media any more. Premarital and extramarital sexuality, premarital conception and birth of children is a widely spread phenomenon among youth today.

On the other hand, the conditions necessary to keep up health of youth are not shaped at the time of sexual liberalization. For instance, active family and demographic propaganda completely ignores a question of sexual education. Female sexuality is still something that is not generally talked about, it is not clear how to talk about that and is always associated with the ever-present question of morality and ethics. The state is not yet ready to recognize importance of sexual education openly. It means that a need to conduct any interventions regarding the sexual relations is not legally covered in the active laws and by-laws adopted both at the level of the government and at the level of the Ministry of Education and the structures subordinated to it. However, from time to time the sections on sexuality appear in some textbooks on educational work in schools. But the interpretations offered by these textbooks raise serious concerns.

For instance, the textbook for students of 6-11 grades *Teenager: Getting Ready to Adulthood (Podrostok: podgotovka k vzrosloy zhyzni)* includes the following version of the exercises called "Seal of Chastity", the goal of which to demonstrate moral, psychological and physiological aspects of virginity, to create positive motivation to premarital abstinence and marital fidelity.<sup>22</sup>

1. A facilitator takes a jar of yogurt, asks who of those present wants to eat yogurt now and invites one participant who expressed a desire to eat yogurt (preferably a boy) to come forward.
2. The facilitator suggests him to tear the jar open. After the jar is opened, the facilitator asks the questions: "Who would like to buy an open jar of yogurt for the same price?" "Isn't this product dangerous for health?"
3. The conclusion is made that the opened jar of yogurt automatically loses its value on the one hand while on the other hand might be a source of a dangerous infection.
4. The facilitator takes a sealed envelope with a letter and turns its back to the students demonstrating the postal seal. Then the facilitator poses a question: "Who has a right to open this envelope?" Then the facilitator demonstrates its face where the addressee's date can be clearly seen.
5. The facilitator tells that each girl is meant for only one man and poses a question: "Who is that only man in whom the girl can place her confidence entirely? Why?"
6. It suggested to the student to use this analogy to think about the 'seal' which seals every girl.
7. The facilitator takes a natural flower into his hands and offers everybody to take something from it as a souvenir.
8. After each participant takes something from the flower as a souvenir, the facilitator asks the students to compare the flower before everybody have held it in their hands and after.
9. The facilitator tells the students that after each sexual intercourse after separation the person necessarily loses a bit of soul which will never return.
10. The conclusion is made: the soul of a guy or a girl who has had premarital sexual relations looks just like the flower looks after it was held by a big number of people.

First, such exercises promote the abstinence standards only for women and, second, they do not meet the day-to-day realities which I have discussed hereinbefore. Virginity is still endowed with certain values and is presented as something that is unambiguously positive. At that, it is positive not because of health issues but due to social aspects of morality and ethics. A concept of romantic love is of primary importance here: one woman, innocent and pure, for one-and-only man (at that, his virginity is not a requirement) to bear children.

<sup>22</sup> *Podrostok: Podgotovka k Vzrosloy Zhyzhi. Programma Kursa dlia Uchashchihsia 6-11 klassov (Teenager: Getting Ready to Adulthood. Course Curriculum for the Students of 6<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> Grades)*. Minsk: BHATU, 2004. P. 32-33.



In the official rhetoric care of reproductive health is often expressed in the framework of care of the demographic situation and the gene pool of the nation. For instance, Aleksandr Kosinets, Head of the Vitebsk Regional Executive Committee, have described this issue in the following manner: *“Schools are not really concerned with the question of sexual education of teenagers. Meantime as a result of promiscuous sexual relations of teenagers, lack of attention to reproduction health, a significant number of young family couples consequently cannot have children”*.<sup>23</sup>

In contemporary Belarussian education, the education component is aimed at shaping ‘real’ men and women and at directing them toward love, family, marriage, procreation. Education is targeted at stressing the value of family and upbringing of children. This family model is rather conservative and does not include other types of families/relations. As a result, according to the statistics, women get married earlier and perform all household- and children-related duties.

In accordance with the official statistics, in 2011 the average age of marriage was 24.5 for women and 26.6 for men. At that, in rural areas women get married even earlier (23.9 years of age) while men get married somewhat later (26.7 years of age). At that, 50 women and only 1 man under 16 years of age got married. Similar is the gap in the age group of 16-19 years old: 7 020 women and 1 516 men of this age group got married.<sup>24</sup>

During the online conference, Marina Artemenko, deputy head of the department for population, gender and family policy, Ministry of Labor and Social Security, pointed out that in 2011 in Belarus 5 741 children were born to mothers 15-19 years of age, which is 53.5% less than in 2000. At that, 10 children were born to mothers under age of 15, which is 1.4% less than in 2000.<sup>25</sup>

Besides, 1 517 young men and 7 070 young women under age of 19 got married in 2011. 20.9 births fall on 1 000 women under age of 20. At that, while in urban areas this indicator totals to 14.3 births, in rural areas it totals to 52.8 births.<sup>26</sup> In 2010, 5.6% of a total number of pregnancies fell on the age group of 15-19 years of age.<sup>27</sup> According to the 2008 data, made 9.3% of all the abortions were performed on women under 19 years of age.<sup>28</sup>

The sexual rights are still a marginal issue in the public debates and specific regulatory policies which could provide access to information. In particular, one of the most serious problems is complete lack of sexual education, integration of its elements in such educational components as family education, sex education, reproductive health care, gender education. However, all these components, as is proved by the analysis of the textbooks, are aimed at shaping the traditional model of gender relations. Thereby sexual education is substituted by the moral rhetoric and ideology.

### Concluding remarks

Contemporary policy regarding the women’s reproductive rights is rather ambivalent and conflictive. On the one hand, the country has adopted certain legal norms and legalized certain procedures. On the other hand, the traditionalist trends which are still strong in the society make it difficult to implement the women’s rights by resting upon women enhanced responsibility and guilt. As a result there are negative tendencies in reproductive health care. An important aspect of the discussions of the reproductive rights is a question who is to take the reproductive decisions. In other words, some or other offenses of the

<sup>23</sup> Bohacheva O. *Kurs of Brake i Semye Planiruetsia Vvesti v Uchrezhdeniah Obrazovania Vitebskoy Oblasti (It Is Planned to Introduce a Course on Marriage and Family in the Vitebsk Region Educational Institutions)*. In: Belta. September 27, 2012. Available at: [http://www.belta.by/ru/all\\_news/regions/Kurs-o-brake-i-semje-planiruetsja-vvesti-v-uchrezhdenijax-obrazovani-ja-Vitebskoj-oblasti\\_i\\_610092.html](http://www.belta.by/ru/all_news/regions/Kurs-o-brake-i-semje-planiruetsja-vvesti-v-uchrezhdenijax-obrazovani-ja-Vitebskoj-oblasti_i_610092.html)

<sup>24</sup> *Deti i Molodezh Respubliki Belarus (Children and Youth of the Republic of Belarus)*. Minsk, 2012. P. 62, 65.

<sup>25</sup> *Detskie Posobia. Online Konferentsia (Children’s Benefits. Online Conference)*. In: Belta. August 30, 2012. Available at: [http://www.belta.by/ru/conference/i\\_272.html](http://www.belta.by/ru/conference/i_272.html)

<sup>26</sup> *Deti i Molodezh Respubliki Belarus (Children and Youth of the Republic of Belarus)*. Minsk, 2012. P. 65, 71.

<sup>27</sup> *Statisticheskiy Ezhehodnik Respubliki Belarus (Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Belarus)*, 2011. Minsk, 2011. P. 79.

<sup>28</sup> *Zdorovye Naselenia Respubliki Belarus (Health of the Population of the Republic of Belarus)*. Minsk, 2011. P. 99.

women's reproductive rights are basically aimed at deprive women of their subjectivity and the right to their bodies. This approach is implemented by both the legal documents and the moral rhetoric. The state primarily uses the restrictive and prohibitive measures rather than the methods and forms of prevention, education etc. Correspondingly the question of present interest is making the issues related to the reproductive rights the topic for public debates, analysis and monitoring of their implementation, campaigns to lobby changes to severe limitations or resistance to the strengthening conservative rhetoric and influence of certain groups, in particular, the religious groups. There are still no concepts regarding incorporation of sexual education in the system of education.