



**Joint submission to the Special Rapporteur on violence against women by
Občan, demokracia a zodpovednosť (Citizen, Democracy and Accountability)
and Ženské kruhy (Women's Circles)**

Mistreatment and violence against women during reproductive health care with a focus on childbirth

May 2019

Občan, demokracia a zodpovednosť (Citizen, Democracy and Accountability - CDA) and Ženské kruhy (Women's Circles) present this submission to the Special Rapporteur on violence against women for its consideration in the context of Mistreatment and violence against women during reproductive health care with a focus on childbirth.

CDA (www.odz.sk) is an independent civic association that promotes the values of open society based on civic responsibility and the accountability of public authorities. One of CDA's primary aims is to assert everyone's rights to human dignity and to protection from discrimination, as well as to assert the human rights of women.

Women's circles (www.zenskekruby.sk) is an independent civic association focusing on the field of maternity care and the rights therein. One of the goals is that respect, dignity and the freedom of choice for women in pregnancy and childbirth would become self-evident.

Slovakia is a country with omnipresent and multi-layered violations of the human rights of women. These violations are of a strong structural nature and exist and deepen despite Slovakia's formal acknowledgements of the principle of equality and other human rights of women, both at the level of national law and internationally. Slovak birthing facilities are patriarchal institutions with hierarchically arranged rules and relationships of authority and power, often employing monocratic decision-making governing the provision of birth care. As mistreatment and violence against women in childbirth is a complex issue that cannot be described briefly without undesirable simplifications, we are submitting two reports that describe the situation in Slovakia extensively. Both reports have been released jointly by CDA and Women's Circles as a result of our long-term cooperation.

The first report **Women – Mothers – Bodies: Women's Human Rights in Obstetric Care in Healthcare Facilities in Slovakia** (2015) is based on monitoring of all Slovak hospitals and on qualitative research using semi-structured in-depth interviews with women describing their birthing experience in the context of international human rights standards and evidence-based medicine.

The second report **Women – Mothers – Bodies II: Systemic Aspects of Violations of Women's Human Rights in Birth Care Provided in Healthcare Facilities in Slovakia** (2016) is based mostly on qualitative research, mainly interviews with doctors and midwives.

Both reports focus on various factors affecting the way birth care is provided and the quality of such care, while understanding these factors in their cultural context and from a wider social perspective as well. From the results of the research it is evident that the violations are very serious in terms of their gravity, variety and the extent of occurrence, that they are of systemic nature, that in many instances they are not even spotted by the health personnel, and that they often stem from institutional settings, practices and cultures. An important fact is that Slovakia has no nationwide guidelines on birth care in place that would have originated from a discussion of all stakeholders involved and that would be based on international human rights standards and evidence-based medicine. At the same time, the State is not monitoring the situation with regard to violations of the human rights of women in facilities where birth care is provided nor is carrying out any other measures that would ensure the enjoyment of human rights and of internationally recognized medical standards in the provision of birth care.

Two unabridged reports Women – Mothers – Bodies (WMB) I and II – on violations of women’s human rights in maternity wards in Slovakia (both of them are in Slovak but have English summaries), based on qualitative research and human rights monitoring can be downloaded here:

- WMB I: http://odz.sk/wp-content/uploads/Z-M-T_publ_el1_pod_sebou.pdf (mainly on women’s childbirth experiences + on the monitoring of the right to access information about provider before a woman comes to a birthing facility; English summary starts on p 185)
- WMB II: http://odz.sk/wp-content/uploads/ZMT2_systemove_apekty_v6_w.pdf (on the systemic aspects of the violations, based on in-depth interviews with women about their childbirth experience as well as on interviews with obstetricians and midwives; English summary starting on p 241).