



The Republic of Belarus Shadow Report 2025

under the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)

prepared by the International Center for civil initiatives “Our House” (Belarus)

and

International Centre for Gender Initiatives "Adliga: Women for Full Citizenship"

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Executive Summary.....	2
Obligations to Eliminate Discrimination.....	3
Participation of women in the political and public life of the country.....	6
Elimination of gender stereotypes and prejudices against women.....	13
Exploitation of women and girls.....	15
Elimination of discrimination against women in employment.....	17
Elimination of discrimination against women in health care.....	18
Elimination of discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations.....	19
Conclusion and Recommendations.....	20

Introduction

This shadow report highlights the systemic and institutionalized discrimination against women in Belarus, despite the state’s ratification of the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)** on **4 February 1981**. The Belarusian government’s actions and policies demonstrate widespread violations of the convention’s provisions, undermining the fundamental rights and freedoms of women. This report addresses gender-specific repression, state-sanctioned violence, forced labor and societal norms that

perpetuate inequality, providing concrete examples of how women are marginalized, degraded, and silenced.

The patriarchal framework of Belarusian society exacerbates gender inequality and allows the regime to exploit these disparities as tools of control. Women are disproportionately targeted for their political activism, face systemic economic and social discrimination, and endure state practices that violate their autonomy and dignity. The international community must hold Belarus accountable for these violations and ensure the protection of women's rights in the country. This report aligns specific examples of discrimination with the articles of CEDAW that are being violated.

The collected materials for this report were mostly in the Russian and the Belarusian languages; the report itself has been written in the English language and shall be translated into Russian for later dissemination in Belarus and in the region.

The sources of the data underlying this report include study cases, media reports, personal experience of some members of the involved and partners organizations, as well as conversations and interviews with politically and socially active women who experienced police/ state violence against them as a result of their activism. The data collection and analyses of the cases briefly presented in this report is work in progress; the information presented here is an intermediate result of some on-going projects. Therefore, this shadow report should not be regarded as exhaustive.

Executive Summary

This shadow report neither was its ambition to analyze and present every gender equality issue in Belarus. Therefore, it should be seen as a complementary document to the country report and to other shadow reports.

The report focuses on two main issues.

The first issue is the systemic legislative discrimination against Belarusian women, which involves state deprivation of nutrition based on gender; heightened state control over women's reproductive health, and, as a consequence, limited access to autonomy, professional mobility, and economic opportunities. Under the guise of "state care for women," a clear form of economic discrimination is also masked, restricting women's rights to equality in the workforce. In Belarus, the only mechanism for protecting women from domestic violence is to seek help from state institutions, which are notorious for their own violence against women. As a result, instead of receiving protection, women often face additional punishment from the state for seeking help. Such punishments may include economic sanctions on the family budget, the removal of children from the family, and other forms of intimidation.

The second aspect focuses on the 'public' violence against politically and socially active women perpetrated by state representatives, such as the police, state officials, civil servants, or other individuals in power representing various state bodies. This violence ranges from physical to psychological, and the purposes of such acts are to manipulate, punish, or discipline women who are vocal in protecting their rights, the rights of their children, or those who are socially and politically active. In other words, this violence is committed to prevent women from participating in public life or from expressing their opinions regarding the state of social and political affairs in their community and in the country. Survivors of state violence have experienced beatings, threats of sexual assault, illegal and forced placement in mental

institutions, threats and/or attempts at involuntary termination of their parental rights and seizure of their children, economic pressure in the form of fines and job dismissals, as well as pressure on their relatives and loved ones. They have also faced harassment, slander, and discrediting campaigns in state media. The systematic violation of the rights of Belarusian-speaking women and attempts to suppress the cultural identity of Belarusian women have also been recorded.

Article 2 – Obligations to Eliminate Discrimination

The government's gender-specific discrimination against women in Belarus constitutes discrimination as defined in CEDAW.

In Belarus, there is a serious deprivation of nutrition for working adult women at the legislative level. In the context of patriarchal norms and values within Belarusian society, women are expected to bear the burden of household chores, caring for children and elderly relatives, while also working full-time alongside men. However, the needs of women, such as pregnancy and postpartum recovery, are not taken into account in Belarusian legislation, indicating that these social groups of women are viewed as secondary by the Belarusian state.

The stereotype still exists in Belarus that a woman in love only needs to see her partner and take care of him, as if this were a substitute for proper nutrition. Unfortunately, seems this stereotype has found its way into legislative practices, as evidenced by Resolution No. 666 of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus, dated October 9, 2023, *On Amending Resolution No. 637 of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus, dated November 9, 2021*¹.

If we compare the food rations defined in the consumer baskets for a working-age man, a working-age woman, and children (6-18 years), it becomes apparent that the nutritional standards are not equal. In many cases, the Belarusian state assumes that fully employed women require even less food than children as young as six years old.

Here are a few examples to illustrate this.

Product	A Working-Age Man	A Working-Age Woman	Children (6–18 Years)
Potatoes	138.7 kg/year (380.0 g/day)	116.1 kg/year (318.1 g/day)	113.2 kg/year (310.1 g/day)
Eggs	233 eggs/year (0.74/day)	217.4 eggs/year (0.60/day)	271.8 eggs/year (0.90/day)
Beef	13.5 kg/year (58.0 g/day)	12.8 kg/year (47.9 g/day)	16.8 kg/year (85.0 g/day)
Pork	13.1 kg/year (24.9 g/day)	6.9 kg/year (18.1 g/day)	14.6 kg/year (24.1 g/day)
Poultry	21.9 kg/year (50.1 g/day)	20.9 kg/year (44.9 g/day)	21.9 kg/year (58.0 g/day)

¹ <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=C22300666>

This table demonstrates how women, especially working women, are allocated fewer resources compared to men and even compared to children. The unequal legislative decisions regarding the distribution of nutrition and other needs, is just one form of state-sanctioned discrimination that impacts women's autonomy, health, and economic equality.

This systemic discrimination against women, particularly in areas like nutrition and reproductive health, reflects the devaluation of women's roles in Belarusian society, as well as the ongoing patriarchal norms that influence legislative decisions.

It is also worth noting the inadequate other state norms in the Resolution of the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Republic of Belarus No. 2 dated January 10, 2020 that do not take into account the real needs of Belarusian women and girls.

Here's how the information of some state norms of clothing, underwear, footwear for a woman aged 18 to 30 years and a girl aged 3 to 6 years can be presented in a table:

Item	Woman (18-30 years old)	Girl (3-6 years old)
Coat (half-coat, jacket)	1 every 3 years	1 every 1,5 years
Bathrobe	1 every 4 years	None
Trousers	1 pair per 3 years	1 pair per year
Dresses	2 every 2.5 years	2 per year
Jeans	1 pair every 2 years	1 pair per year
Skirts	2 every 3 years	None
Sweaters	2 every 4 years	2 every 2 years
Bra	1 per year	None
Underwear	4 pairs per year	4 pairs per year
Boots (insulated shoes)	1 pairs per 3 years	1 pair per year
Sports shoes (trainers)	1 pair per 3 years	1 pair per year
Summer hat	None	1 per year
Headscarf	1 per 2 years	None

The minimum wage in Belarus is calculated based on the minimum consumer basket, and as a result of these gender biases, there is a significant hidden wage gap between women and men in Belarus.

- Nutritional deprivation of women and girls prisoners in Belarus

On March 25, 2021, the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus adopted Resolution No. 169, titled "On Establishing Food and Personal Hygiene Standards for Certain Categories

of Citizens"². This resolution regulates the nutritional standards for convicted individuals serving sentences in correctional facilities, prisons, detention centers, and rehabilitation centers under the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

The established food allowances for women and girls prisoners raise significant concerns about their adequacy to meet basic dietary needs. Furthermore, in certain cases, the prescribed rations for women are even lower than those for men. For example, while men are entitled to 250 grams of bread made from a mix of rye and wheat flour per day, women receive only 150 grams.

Daily Food Allowance for women and girls prisoners in Belarus

- 90 grams of meat
- 60 grams of fish with head
- 25 grams of poultry
- 500 grams of potatoes
- 230 grams of root vegetables (onions, carrots, beets)
- 20 grams of fresh vegetables (cucumbers, tomatoes, greens)
- 200 grams of grains

In addition, women and girls prisoners are permitted only three chicken eggs per week. The menu does not include fruits, nuts, legumes, or dairy products, resulting in a diet that is severely imbalanced and deficient in essential nutrients.

Additional allowances for underage girls (prisoners under 18)

Slightly better conditions are provided for underage girls, who receive an additional daily allowance of:

- 10 grams of sugar
- 30 grams of butter
- 40 grams of cottage cheese
- 125 milliliters of milk
- 50 grams of meat

Additionally, underage girls are allowed five chicken eggs per week.

While there are some supplementary provisions for prisoners with disabilities, pregnant women, breastfeeding mothers, individuals living with HIV, and those with diabetes, these measures are still insufficient to maintain good health.

² Постановление СМ РБ 169 Об установлении норм питания и норм обеспечения средствами личной гигиены отдельных категорий граждан от 25.03.2021 - Законодательство Беларуси 2025 год

The lack of fruits, legumes, and dairy products, combined with limited portions of protein and fresh vegetables, underscores the inadequacy of these nutritional standards. This further exacerbates the physical and mental health challenges faced by women prisoners in Belarus.

Hygiene Provisions for women and girls prisoners in Belarus

The resolution also specifies hygiene allowances for women prisoners, which include:

- 200 grams of laundry soap per month
- 100 grams of toilet soap per month
- 25 meters of toilet paper per month
- 10 sanitary pads per month

For reference, gynecologists recommend changing sanitary pads every 3–4 hours during the first days of menstruation, meaning 10 pads would last only about two days. However, reports indicate that women in Belarusian prisons often do not even receive the basic hygiene products prescribed under these minimal standards.

This deprivation, combined with inadequate nutritional provisions, reflects systemic neglect and discriminatory treatment of women and girls in detention facilities in Belarus.

Article 3 – Participation of women in the political and public life of the country

The state's actions actively hinder Belarusian women's ability to participate in political and public life and access equal opportunities.

- Women's organizations face significant barriers to registration and operation, limiting their ability to advocate for gender equality and protect women's rights.

At present, Belarusian state registration of all independent women's non-governmental organizations involved in the protection of women's rights across various sectors has been liquidated.

In addition, staff members of women's organizations have faced various forms of pressure, including house and office searches, confiscation of equipment, information carriers, and documents; sealing of offices; summons for interrogations and explanatory talks; arrests of staff members; threats from law enforcement agencies; media discreditation; website blocking; refusals to register projects; and coercion into self-liquidation. Other forms of pressure have included inspections by the Department of Humanitarian Affairs of the Presidential Administration, the Ministry of Emergency Situations; account arrests or blocking; requests for information from financial authorities; financial inspections by the tax service, the Department of Financial Investigations (DFR), or the State Control Committee (SCC); pressure from the KGB on property owners providing legal addresses for the registration of women's organizations.

The increase in repression against gender organizations and female activists has been influenced by the growing women's movement in Belarus and the active participation of women in political and electoral processes, particularly in the roles of members and leaders of opposition candidates' campaigns (Veronika Tsepkalo and Maria Kalesnikava), signature collectors, organizers of informational pickets, independent election observers, and participants

in protest actions, including mass women's marches, solidarity chains, and women's actions involving students, retirees, doctors, teachers, and other professionals. These protests also saw significant involvement from mothers of large families, traditionally seen as a support group for Alexander Lukashenko.

Members of women's organizations have also actively provided assistance to other women who have become victims of political repression, including delivering food parcels, offering psychological support, and assisting with evacuation from the country and preparation of evacuation documents. These actions triggered irritation from state authorities and various institutions, which took all possible measures to dismantle the institutionalization and structuring of the Belarusian women's movement, primarily targeting women's organizations. For example, on July 14, 2021, the Vitebsk women's cultural and educational organization "Gender Answer" was liquidated and banned by an order of the Oktyabrsky District Court of Vitebsk.

On January 4, 2022, the Law of the Republic of Belarus No. 144-Z "On Amendments to the Codes" was adopted, which entered into force on January 22, 2022. According to this law, Article 193-1 is reinstated in the Criminal Code, specifically criminalizing the illegal organization of or participation in the activities of public associations, religious organizations, or foundations.

This means that members of Belarusian women's organizations that have been liquidated or banned in Belarus may face fines, arrest, or imprisonment for up to two years³.

- Public death threats, publication of "firing lists" listing prominent women human rights defenders and women activists in state media, as well as labeling women human rights defenders as "persons involved in terrorist activities," for which the death penalty is prescribed in Belarus.

On August 6, 2022, in the main state newspaper "Belarus Today," one of the most well-known Belarusian state propagandists, Andrei Mukavozchik, published an article titled "Firing Lists," in which he listed well-known Belarusian women who are actively fighting for women's rights, including human rights activist Olga Karach and one of the leaders of the women's protest movement, Veronika Tsepkalo. Mukavozchik stated that they should be executed "at once, without further pity" for being unanimously elected as members of the Council of the Forum of Democratic Forces and reported the existence of "shooting lists" of activists and human rights defenders who oppose the Belarusian authorities⁴.

The creation of public "firing lists" of Belarusian women human rights defenders and activists, naming those who should be executed for their activism, is reminiscent of the Stalin-era "execution lists" in the USSR—pretrial lists of individuals to be sentenced by the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court to various punishments (primarily execution), which were initially approved by Stalin and his closest associates. The origin of this simplified "list-based" method of punishment can be traced to the Resolution of the Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR from December 1, 1934. According to this resolution, investigations into cases of terrorist organizations and acts of terrorism were to be expedited (within ten days), judicial hearings were conducted without the participation of the

3 <https://etalonline.by/document/?regnum=HK9900275#&Article=423/1>

4 Андрей Муковозчик: Расстрельные списки

parties and without the calling of witnesses, and neither appeals nor petitions for clemency were permitted. Death sentences were to be carried out the same day. The "simplified procedure" required mandatory preliminary approval by the Politburo of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks), formalized through a special decision.

In connection with these existing "firing lists" of women human rights defenders and activists, it is important to highlight the inclusion of women human rights defenders and activists on lists of "persons involved in terrorist activities," which also directly refers to the Stalin-era execution lists under the "simplified procedure."

For instance, human rights defender Olga Karach, head of the International Center for Civil Initiatives "Our House," was placed on the "List of Persons Involved in Terrorist Activities" by the Belarusian KGB, listed as No. 773 in September 3, 2021⁵.

At present, **29 Belarusian women**—human rights defenders, lawyers, animal rights activists, feminist, civil activists, media bloggers and independent journalists—have been included in the list of "persons involved in terrorist activities," which is compiled by the KGB, one of the biggest repressive bodies of the Belarusian government that targets dissenting women and independent journalists. None of these women have participated in any violent actions, and all of them are in open opposition to Alexander Lukashenko, known for their involvement in Belarus's public and political life.

Although Article 59 of the Criminal Code of Belarus specifies that the death penalty is not applied to women, the combination of public "firing lists" of women human rights defenders officially accused of terrorism suggests that the non-application of the death penalty to women in Belarus—especially those who oppose the Belarusian authorities and are actively involved in human rights work—could be reconsidered by the Belarusian authorities. Such publications of "firing lists" of women human rights defenders and activists may be a form of preparing public opinion in Belarus.

- Mass labeling of women human rights defenders, activists, and journalists as extremists

The widespread labeling of women human rights defenders, activists, and journalists as extremists, alongside the designation of organizations advocating for women's rights as extremist entities, has become a powerful tool of repression in Belarus.

On May 14, 2021, a new law titled "On Amendments to Laws on Countering Extremism" was signed, taking effect on June 14, 2021. Later, on October 15, 2021, the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus enacted Decree No. 575, "On Measures to Counter Extremism and the Rehabilitation of Nazism." Throughout 2021, the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus was amended several times with provisions targeting actions defined as extremist under Belarusian law. For example, changes to Article 361, criminalizing calls for restrictive measures (sanctions), came into force on December 31, 2021⁶⁷.

5 <https://www.dw.com/ru/v-belarusi-aktivistka-karach-vkljuchena-v-spisok-terroristov/a-59072368>

6 <https://etalonline.by/document/?regnum=h10700203>

7 <https://ivje.gov.by/ru/actual-ru/view/o-merax-protivodejstvija-ekstremizmu-i-terrorizmu-reabilitatsii-natsizma-otvetstvennost-za-25945-2024/>

These legislative changes significantly broadened the definition of extremism and extremist activities. A vague and overly broad definition of “extremist organization” was also introduced. According to the new law, extremist organizations include not only those engaged in or financing extremist activities but also those supporting such activities in other ways or recognizing their possibility in their operations. The law also introduced the concept of “extremist formations,” which differ from extremist organizations in that they lack registration and can be declared extremist extrajudicially by the Ministry of Internal Affairs or the State Security Committee (KGB).

The Ministry of Internal Affairs is responsible for maintaining a list of organizations, formations, and individuals linked to extremist activities.

The broad and ambiguous definitions in the extremist legislation mean that standard activities of women’s organizations—such as submitting shadow reports to CEDAW, conducting monitoring of violations of women’s and girls’ rights, disseminating information through websites and social media, educational work, and international advocacy—can be deemed illegal and categorized as extremist activities.

For example, Belarusian human rights defender **Olga Karach**, along with her social media platforms, website, YouTube channels, and associated entities, has been labeled as “extremist” **19 times** in Belarus. Under the Belarusian Criminal Code, she faces up to **seven years in prison** for “extremism.” On November 1, 2024, Olga Karach was designated as an extremist individual and barred from military service for **17 years**.

Members of women’s organizations that have been deregistered and labeled as extremist in Belarus risk criminal prosecution under **Article 423.1 of the Criminal Code**⁸ if they refuse to cease their advocacy and human rights activities. This article criminalizes the failure to comply with decisions declaring an organization, activity, or suspending the activities of foreign (in exile) or international organizations. Women found guilty under this provision may face penalties ranging from fines to disqualification from certain positions or activities, arrest, restriction of freedom for up to three years, or imprisonment for the same term, potentially coupled with disqualification from holding specific positions or engaging in certain activities.

- Women are often targeted for their political dissent through practices designed to humiliate, to block and degrade them.

Women involved in political and public life endure the same spectrum of repression as men, including arrests, detentions, prolonged incommunicado detention, where they spend years in isolation without contact with family and lawyers, phone calls, or the ability to receive food parcels. They are subjected to various forms of torture, deprivation of medical care, and threats of sexual violence by law enforcement officers. These practices violate their human dignity and are designed to maximize humiliation.

During detention, women report being beaten, choked, and forced to lie on the ground while tightly restrained in handcuffs. Female detainees with chronic illnesses, such as diabetes or

8 <https://etalonline.by/document/?regnum=HK9900275#&Article=423/1>

psoriasis, are often denied necessary medications, leading to further deterioration of their health.

The forms of torture and mistreatment in Belarusian prisons are numerous and would require a dedicated report to document comprehensively. Below, we highlight the most egregious abuses faced by women political prisoners:

Biological Terrorism Against Female Political Prisoners

One deeply disturbing practice involves placing sick inmates—those with infectious diseases such as COVID-19, HIV, or tuberculosis—in cells with healthy detainees, deliberately exposing them to life-threatening illnesses. At least one death of a woman who participated in the 2020 protests has been documented as a result of this practice.

Gender-Specific Violations

Women in detention face additional gender-based violence and degrading treatment, including:

- **Exposure to Extreme Weather:** Some women have been stripped naked and left outside in freezing temperatures as punishment, leading to severe illnesses. Others report being confined to outdoor cages for hours in harsh weather conditions.
- **Sexualized Violence and Harassment:** Female detainees often endure invasive and humiliating strip searches during menstruation, including body cavity inspections. Women report being forced to squat and spread their buttocks while naked, with blood visibly running down their legs, intensifying their humiliation. During arrests and detentions, female activists frequently report sexual harassment by male law enforcement officers, including groping and threats of rape. Such threats are used as psychological torture to coerce women into signing incriminating documents or making false confessions.
- **Denial of Hygiene and Basic Necessities:**
 - Women in detention are denied medical care and essential hygiene products, particularly during menstruation. Access to sanitary products is often withheld.
 - Basic items like soap, toilet paper, and water for washing are routinely denied. Women resort to cleaning themselves with wet wipes, which they wash and reuse.
 - Access to showers is severely limited. Despite legal guarantees of at least a 15-minute weekly shower, women report going weeks without being allowed to bathe. Many are forced to sleep without mattresses or bedding.
- **Psychological and Emotional Abuse**

Women detainees are subjected to significant emotional and psychological abuse:

 - They are coerced into signing false confessions or providing self-incriminating testimony under duress. Those who resist face threats of further punishment or harsher conditions.
 - Threats against family members are common, intensifying the pressure to cooperate.
 - Communication with loved ones is often prohibited, including bans on phone calls, visits, and food parcels.

- Religious practices are also restricted. Guards have confiscated Christian crosses, banned religious literature such as Bibles, and prevented women from observing religious rituals. Access to clergy is frequently denied.
- **Use of Torture and Chemical Agents**

Reports have emerged of chemical torture in detention centers. For example, prison staff have flooded cells with concentrated bleach, exposing detainees to toxic fumes that cause severe respiratory issues, vomiting, and eye irritation. In some cases, women's clothing was deliberately doused with bleach, rendering it unwearable, while prison authorities prohibited relatives from providing replacements.

- **Other forms of repression and pressure on Belarusian women actively participating in political and public life.**

The confiscation of children from women activists, human rights defenders, politicians, and journalists as a measure to limit women's participation in public and political life.

Belarusian legislation contains provisions that allow for the confiscation of children from women due to their social and political activism. For example, the Presidential Decree of the Republic of Belarus No. 18 of November 24, 2006, "On Additional Measures for State Protection of Children in Dysfunctional Families," does not clarify the concept of "otherwise improperly fulfilling their duties to raise and support children." This vagueness leads to state manipulation, abuse, and repressive practices, primarily targeting women human rights defenders, journalists, local activists, protest participants, who face threats and, in some cases, the direct confiscation of their children as a tool of pressure due to their public-political activities or civil stance. It is important to note that children can be taken from their families (separated from the mother) without a court decision, in an administrative manner.

On September 14, 2020, the Prosecutor General's Office of Belarus threatened to take children away from families if they were brought to protests. According to the Resolution of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus No. 22 of January 15, 2019, "On Recognizing Children as Being in Socially Dangerous Situations," the Presidential Decree No. 18 of November 24, 2006, "On Additional Measures for State Protection of Children in Dysfunctional Families," and the Family Code, if a woman with a minor child under the age of 16 is detained during a protest, the child's situation can be recognized by the state as socially dangerous. As a result, the child can be taken from the family and placed in an orphanage or foster care for up to six months⁹. During this time, the woman will be required to pay compensation for the child's stay in a state institution, which also serves as an additional economic and moral lever to discipline and restrict women's participation in political and public life.

In the new Resolution of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus No. 1055 of December 30, 2024¹⁰, "On Recognizing Children as Being in Socially Dangerous Situations and Needing State Protection," the government decreed that families will be recognized as being in socially dangerous situations (SDS) if parents are charged under a number of administrative articles. Among them is Article 19.11 of the Administrative Code (*distribution*,

⁹ <http://www.ctv.by/novosti-minska-i-minskoy-oblasti/mogut-rassmatrivat-vopros-o-socialno-opasnom-polozhenii-rebyonka>

¹⁰ pravo.by

production, storage, and transportation of information products containing calls for extremist activity or promoting such activity) i.e., politically motivated articles.

The government uses punitive psychiatry to silence women, particularly human rights defenders and anti-corruption activists from rural areas.

These women are involuntarily committed to psychiatric hospitals, where they are isolated. Additionally, Belarusian authorities use punitive psychiatry to silence women who have witnessed serious crimes committed by law enforcement officers.

For example, political prisoner Maria Uspenskaya witnessed the murder of her husband, Andrei Zeltsar, in their apartment by KGB officers on September 28, 2021. As result Belarusian authorities charged her with complicity in the murder of KGB officer Dmitry Fedosyuk, who was also killed at the scene under unclear circumstances.

Although Maria had no involvement in the death of the KGB officer, she was tried as "a person who committed a socially dangerous act, as defined by criminal law, while being mentally incompetent or suffering from a mental disorder after committing the crime" (Clause 13 of Article 6 of the Criminal Procedure Code). As a result, she was isolated and denied the right to attend her trial, preventing her from testifying or providing her account of the events. Instead, her mother represented her interests in court.

The court imposed compulsory security measures and treatment on Maria, including forced hospitalization in a psychiatric facility with regular observation. The court did not specify the duration of her forced stay, meaning she could remain confined indefinitely, potentially until her death.

Additionally, the court ordered Maria to pay material compensation for "moral damages" in the amount of 100,000 rubles to Dmitry Fedosyuk's widow. It remains unclear why a witness to a crime is being held responsible for compensating the widow of a KGB officer.

Given the erosion of the judicial system in Belarus, there are grounds to suspect that she is being detained in a psychiatric institution to isolate her as a witness to a crime committed by KGB officers.

Show trials in absentia and severe sentences for women activists, journalists, and human rights defenders

In Belarus, women actively engaged in public and political life face brutal repression. Those who manage to avoid arrest are often tried in absentia and handed severe prison sentences.

In 2022, amidst ongoing political crackdowns, Belarus introduced the concept of "special proceedings." This legal mechanism allows the authorities to prosecute individuals living outside the country. In essence, the state has legitimized holding trials in absentia (without the accused being present).

Women subjected to special proceedings have almost no ability to defend themselves. This is due both to procedural rules and the way they are applied in practice.

The accused women are often left completely unaware of the charges against them or the evidence being used. Under such circumstances, it is nearly impossible for them to present a

defense or refute the accusations. While the Criminal Procedure Code mandates that a lawyer must participate in special proceedings from the outset, if the accused does not appoint one, a lawyer is assigned through the regional state bar association.

However, in practice, these court-appointed lawyers often refuse to communicate with their clients. In some cases, they distance themselves entirely and fail to present any arguments on behalf of the accused. Moreover, identifying which lawyer is involved is often impossible, as this information is not made public.

This behavior by lawyers can be explained by the risks they face. Although the law does not explicitly prohibit communication between a lawyer and a client in special proceedings, lawyers fear that sharing case details with the accused could be interpreted as disclosing investigation secrets or classified court proceedings. Worse, it could be deemed assistance to "extremist activities," potentially leading to the loss of their legal license.

As a result, even without formal restrictions, lawyers are effectively unable to provide meaningful defense for their clients in such cases.

For example, on October 24, 2024, human rights defender Olga Karach was sentenced in absentia to 12 years in prison and fined €170,000 for "attempting a coup by unconstitutional means." On the same day, in the same criminal case—details of which remain unknown—Veronika Tsepikalo, a head of the Belarusian Women's Fund and a prominent leader of the protest movement, was also sentenced in absentia to 12 years in prison.

To date, the enormous efforts of the Belarusian authorities to force these women back to Belarus, where they would be immediately arrested and imprisoned, are well-documented. However, neither the names of the state-appointed lawyers nor the details of the charges have been disclosed. This lack of transparency is a common practice targeting socially and politically active Belarusian women.

Article 5 – Elimination of gender stereotypes and prejudices against women

The Belarusian government perpetuates harmful gender and cultural stereotypes that reinforce discrimination and societal control over women.

- In Belarusian prisons, the practice of shaving women's hair remains a form of gender-specific punishment designed to strip women of their identity and femininity.

In patriarchal Belarusian society, women's hair is deeply tied to their strength and identity, symbolizing femininity. Prison authorities exploit this cultural significance as a means of humiliation and exerting additional control over detained women and unaged girls.

Prison administrations often use the threat of shaving hair, or the act itself, as a tool for discipline and punishment. This act is sometimes carried out by other female inmates under the orders of the administration, further amplifying the humiliation. Women who are forced to shave their heads face significant stigma and are assigned a lower social status within the prison hierarchy. This directly affects their relationships with other inmates and their access to resources, compounding the challenges of prison life.

The practice is particularly taboo and rarely discussed, yet it is widespread in Belarusian women's prisons. The humiliation of being shaved bald not only dehumanizes the women but reinforces their subjugation within the prison system.

Additionally, head shaving is the only method used in prisons to address issues such as lice infestations, despite the availability of modern treatments for lice. This practice perpetuates harmful stereotypes prevalent in Belarusian society, where lice are often associated with marginalized or impoverished groups, such as the homeless or drug addicts. Women who contract lice—often during transfers between prisons—are immediately subjected to this degrading punishment. The stigma of lice infestation further lowers their status among inmates, fostering discrimination and isolation rather than addressing the problem effectively.

In this way, the practice of head shaving in Belarusian prisons serves not only as a tool of punishment but also as a means of erasing individuality and reinforcing systemic oppression of women.

- Using of yellow patches to stigmatize Belarusian women political prisoners.

In Belarusian prisons, female political prisoners are marked with yellow patches, evoking painful historical associations with the Holocaust, when Jews were identified with yellow stars in Nazi concentration camps. This system enables Belarusian prison authorities to identify and isolate female political prisoners, subjecting them to additional repression and strict surveillance.

Initially, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Belarus denied using such stigmatizing tactics. However, under pressure from irrefutable evidence presented by the human rights organization "Our House," they were forced to admit to the use of various colored patches to categorize prisoners. For example, underage girls convicted under Article 328 (for minor, non-violent drug-related offenses) are required to wear green patches, making them targets for heightened restrictions, limited family contact, and frequent cell inspections.

In addition to marking female prisoners, Belarusian authorities used color-coded labels to identify protesting women during arrests and detentions in the 2020 protests. Different colors signified the level of abuse or torture detainees might face in detention centers or police stations.

The stigma of the yellow patch for political prisoners has become one of the starkest symbols of the state's efforts to dehumanize and isolate female political prisoners in Belarus. For example, Maria Kalesnikava¹¹, one of the leaders of the Belarusian protest movement in 2020, is serving an 11-year sentence and is forced to wear a yellow patch.

- Gender-based stigmatization of underage girls aged 14 and above sentenced to long prison terms in Belarus under Article 328 of the Criminal Code (so-called "Girls-328")

In Belarus, girls as young as 14 years old are sentenced to long prison terms (usually about 8 to 10 years) under Article 328 of the Criminal Code, which pertains to minor non-violent drug-related offenses. This law has a disproportionate impact on young girls, who are often sentenced to lengthy prison terms for relatively minor offenses.

11 <https://news.house/63402>

One of the most significant consequences of this system is the gendered stigmatization of girls convicted under Article 328. In Belarus's patriarchal society, a girl-328 sentenced to such long prison terms is often regarded as "lost" to society, with her family and community distancing themselves from her. Unlike boys, whose families typically fight for their release, the families of girls convicted under this article often reject them. These girls are viewed as "ruined" and are cut off from any support from families, including funding for legal representation, family visits, and even basic provisions such as food packages from relatives.

As a result, the lives of girls convicted under Article 328 in Belarusian prisons become increasingly bleak. In addition, due to violations of Belarusian law, these girls-328 are often incarcerated with adult women, which significantly increases their vulnerability to sexual harassment and abuse. This is particularly concerning because adult women may exploit their position of power over younger, more vulnerable prisoners, especially given the stigma attached to girls convicted under this article.

Moreover, these girls-328, who are often left without any familial support, are forced into slave labor within the prison system. With salaries as low as 2-3-5 or even 10 euros per month, they struggle to survive and endure extreme hardships. The state does nothing to alleviate the suffering of these young girls, who are often subjected to grueling labor and inhumane conditions.

Furthermore, there is a complete lack of support for the rehabilitation of these girls once they are released. They typically have little or no meaningful education, as the prison system does not provide adequate educational opportunities, and they are not equipped with the skills or resources necessary for reintegration into society. The state provides no funding for their rehabilitation, leaving them to fend for themselves with no assistance in overcoming the stigma and the trauma they endured.

The Belarusian state and society, as a whole, have abandoned these girls, viewing them as "spent material" unworthy of rehabilitation or care. There is no effort to reintegrate them into society, and no programs exist to address their specific needs as young women who have been denied basic rights, education, and opportunities. This systemic neglect and stigmatization ensure that many of these girls remain marginalized, unable to break free from their past and reintegrate into society.

Article 6 – Exploitation of Women and Girls

The state exploits women and girls in detention, forcing them into slave labor under harsh conditions in prisons.

- In Belarusian prisons, women and underage girls (from the age of 14) are subjected to forced labor.

They typically work in sewing workshops, making washcloths, or cutting threads. These prisoners do not have employment contracts, and the work experience they gain while incarcerated is not credited toward their overall work history. Additionally, the women and underage girls in detention are not eligible for medical insurance. If they suffer a workplace injury, they will not receive medical treatment, and no compensation for the injury will be provided.

Their wages range from a few euro cents to several cents per month (usually between 1-10 euros per month). They are not paid for part-time work or for downtime, unlike regular workers. Women and girls who fail to meet work quotas face severe punishment, including the suspension of food packages or family visits, or being placed in solitary confinement. After such punishment, they often return in poor health due to the harsh conditions in solitary. Refusing forced labor is also punishable by solitary confinement.

Refusing to work or failing to meet excessively high quotas may result in a prisoner being designated as a "persistent violator." This designation eliminates any possibility of early release, leads to a harsher regime, and deprives them of packages and family visits. Sometimes, meeting the quotas is impossible due to a lack of materials. After receiving three such penalties, a prisoner is officially classified as a "persistent violator," effectively losing the chance for early release. This status can only be removed one year after the last violation, and only if no further penalties are incurred during that time. However, this is nearly impossible, as women and girls are intentionally penalized to maintain their "persistent violator" status. Through such measures, the administration ensures that women and girls remain incarcerated until the end of their sentence, subjected to forced labor while being denied any possibility of early release.

- Punitive practices and forced labor of girls aged 11-13 in Belarus punished for family dysfunction

In Belarus, the law "On the Fundamentals of the System of Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency and Neglect," introduced in 2003, mandates that minors aged 11 to 18, who require special conditions for upbringing, are placed in specialized educational institutions. A court decision is made if a child has committed a criminal offense but is below the age of criminal responsibility, if they have been administratively sanctioned three or more times in a year, or if they have committed a minor offense, such as public drunkenness or petty hooliganism. These children are then sent to special vocational schools.

In Petrykov, there is a special vocational school for girls, where female minors as young as 11+ years old can be placed for minor crimes such as vagrancy, alcohol consumption in public, prostitution, theft, and hooliganism. The school houses approximately 40-50 pupils and is one of the few closed institutions with limited available information. These girls are typically from dysfunctional or broken families, and some are social or biological orphans, while others come from intact families but face parental misunderstanding.

The strict daily routine in the institution begins at 7:00 a.m. with wake-up, followed by morning exercises and cleaning. The girls attend school on-site, learning trades such as seamstress or thermal processing. After the evening roll call, they are handed over to the staff. Lights out is at 9:30 p.m. The court determines the length of stay, which usually does not exceed two years.

Instead of offering assistance to these girls, who are in difficult life situations, the state exploits them as forced laborers. The school's website features a catalog of items sewn by the girls, which are sold. In line with common practice, they are paid only a pittance, similar to the wages of prisoners in Belarus's penal system.

The girls' rights are highly restricted. The institution operates a four-level point system, where points are awarded based on behavior and task completion. After accumulating sufficient points for four months, the girl may be allowed to visit the city with a parent or school staff member.

If their behavior is exemplary, they may also be allowed to visit home during school breaks, provided their home situation is stable.

The girls at the vocational school face several violations of their rights. They can receive packages from home and meet with their parents, but everything is thoroughly searched, including letters. When making phone calls, a staff member is present to prevent the girls from disclosing any abuse or mistreatment. Internet access is severely restricted and only available under supervision, preventing them from reporting violations or abuses of power by the staff. Furthermore, the girls are forced to think of their situation as a prison sentence. They live under strict schedules, wear identical uniforms, work for minimal pay (or even for free), acquire vocational skills, and march in formation under the supervision of staff members.

All of this is justified by the notion that girls aged 11+, who have been punished, must be deprived of any privileges that might distract or tempt them, in order to discipline, break their spirits, and force them into submission. The system is not designed for the girls' social integration into society or for providing them with future support.

Article 11 – Elimination of discrimination against women in employment

Women face systemic discrimination in the workplace, including restricted access to professions and retaliatory dismissals.

- Belarus maintains a list of professions prohibited for women, limiting their employment opportunities in fields deemed "unsuitable" based on gender stereotypes.

In Belarus, there exists a list of professions that are prohibited for women, which is a form of gender discrimination. Although the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Republic of Belarus reduced the list from 252 to 181 professions, and then again to 88 professions by Resolution No. 35 on June 6, 2022, the fact that certain jobs remain off-limits to women reflects deep-rooted gender inequality.

Among the professions that are still restricted for women are roles such as lead solder, fireproof worker, blacksmith, metal caster, firefighter, separator, leather sorter, dyer, driller, crane operator, diver, livestock fighter, boiler operator, bitumen boiler worker, mill operator, excavator operator, crane operator, train conductor, leather processing worker, and many others. This list perpetuates the stereotype that women are unsuitable for certain types of physical labor, ignoring their capabilities and reinforcing outdated gender roles.

The resolution passed by the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection on June 6, 2022 (as an annex to the Ministry's Resolution No. 35 from June 12, 2014)¹² continues to impose these discriminatory restrictions on women. This policy undermines women's rights to work freely and choose their profession without being limited by gender-based assumptions.

- Women who oppose the regime are often fired from their jobs, facing economic hardship and further marginalization.

One of the most common methods of pressure used against politically and socially active women in Belarus has been dismissal from their jobs. Hundreds of Belarusian women have

12 Изменен список профессий, запрещенных для женщин - 2022

lost their income simply because they spoke out against Lukashenko. Some resigned under pressure, others were forced to write resignation letters due to their perceived disloyalty to the regime, and some were outright dismissed. The result is the same: numerous families were left without a livelihood due to politically motivated dismissals, including those where the woman was the sole breadwinner.

Statistics show that it is significantly more difficult for women to find new employment. Employers are often discouraged by factors such as a lack of experience, young children, potential pregnancy, or the (pre-)retirement age of a prospective female employee. Politically motivated dismissals serve as a tool for the state to exert pressure on Belarusian women, leaving them with no choice but to accept any available job. The stakes are especially high for these women, as the lack of stable employment can lead to the state removing their children from their care. In Belarus, unemployment is one of the criteria for child removal from families, intensifying the precarious situation faced by these women.

Article 12 – Elimination of discrimination against women in health care

The state violates women's right to health through neglect and discriminatory practices.

- **Gender-Based Discrimination in Driver's License Requirements in Belarus**

In the Republic of Belarus, women are required to provide a mandatory medical certificate from an obstetrician-gynecologist as part of the process to obtain or renew a driver's license. This requirement does not apply to men, reflecting a form of systemic gender discrimination, where women's health is used as a tool to impose state control and limit their social and economic opportunities.

If a woman fails to provide this certificate, she is denied access to the licensing process. This discriminatory requirement applies in the following situations:

- Obtaining a new driver's license.
- Renewing an expired driver's license.
- Exchanging a foreign driver's license for a Belarusian one.
- Reclaiming a driver's license after revocation.
- Obtaining a duplicate driver's license.
- Restoring a driver's license permit (talon).
- Adding a category to drive mopeds or other vehicles.

This regulation is enforced under the Ministry of Health's Order No. 95, dated September 5, 2022, titled "On Mandatory Medical Examinations for Driver Candidates and Reevaluation of Drivers"¹³. According to the order, results from medical examinations are recorded in Form 1-MVK/U-22, which is completed by members of the medical commission, including an obstetrician-gynecologist for women.

13 <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=W22238757&p1=1>

The requirement for a gynecological certificate has significant consequences for women in Belarus. First, it severely restricts women's autonomy, subjecting them to invasive and unnecessary medical oversight, reinforcing patriarchal norms, and limiting their bodily autonomy.

It also hinders professional and economic mobility for women. Many professions in Belarus, including those in transportation, logistics, and emergency services, require a valid driver's license. By imposing additional bureaucratic barriers on women, this policy reduces their access to employment opportunities and economic independence.

The absence of a similar requirement for men highlights the unequal treatment of women, implying that their reproductive health is a matter of state control, even when it has no relevance to their ability to drive.

Article 16 - Elimination of discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations.

Despite ratifying CEDAW, Belarus has failed to adopt effective measures to eliminate discrimination and provide legal protection for women. Additionally, the situation of girls and women in Belarus has worsened each year.

Legal mechanisms to address domestic violence are either ineffective or absent. Instead of receiving the expected assistance from the state, victims of domestic violence face various forms of state punishment, leading to fear and a reluctance to seek help from the government.

In 2023, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Belarus registered approximately 80,000 reports of domestic violence, or about 219 cases of domestic violence reported daily¹⁴. In Belarus, one in every three murders and one in every four cases of bodily harm occurs in the context of domestic violence, perpetrated by close family members. In most cases, women and children are victims of domestic violence. However, a significant number of such incidents go unreported, as many women tolerate the violence or fail to report it to the authorities.

Belarus lacks independent shelters for victims of domestic violence, and there are no non-governmental organizations working on issues related to domestic violence. The situation is further compounded by the absence of accessible independent assistance for victims. The primary burden of addressing domestic violence is carried by the police and psychiatric medical institutions, which are often sources of violence themselves. Both children and their mothers have repeatedly testified to instances of abuse within these organizations. Girls, especially those without parental care, are particularly vulnerable.

In Belarus, there is a disproportionate punishment for domestic violence and opposition activities. For example, a man who systematically abuses his wife may receive a sentence similar to that of someone involved in opposition activities, such as participating in opposition chat groups. Similarly, membership in an opposition organization and the rape of a woman are punished similarly.

14 https://belta.by/society/view/ezhegodno-organy-vnutrennih-del-registrirujut-porjadka-80-tys-soobschenij-o-domashnem-nasilii-559009-2023/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

According to the Administrative Code, for the intentional infliction of bodily harm (Article 10.1 of the Administrative Code) to a wife, a husband or partner may be fined up to ten base amounts (approximately 117.5 euros) or sentenced to administrative arrest for up to 30 days. Most often, the man is fined, which effectively impacts the family budget, punishing the victimized woman. At the same time, for similar violence against a law enforcement officer (Article 364 of the Criminal Code), any individual—whether a man, woman, or adolescent—may face up to 6 years in prison.

Women who report domestic violence are often punished by the state instead of receiving help. Their children are placed under special supervision as "children from dysfunctional families," and in case of repeated reports, the children may be removed from their custody as a retaliatory measure, according to the Presidential Decree of the Republic of Belarus dated November 24, 2006, No. 18 "On Additional Measures for the State Protection of Children in Dysfunctional Families."

In Belarus, women (and parents in general) who have had their children removed are required to pay a fee to the state if the child is placed in a state institution. This payment, called "reimbursement for expenses incurred by the state for the maintenance of children," amounts to approximately 80-100 euros per child per month. This is a critical sum for women living in rural areas or from poor social strata. The removal of a child from the family typically lasts about six months.

As a result, women are reluctant to report domestic violence because, instead of receiving assistance and protection, the state applies punitive measures against them, from economic penalties to the removal of children. This makes the issue of domestic violence hidden and invisible to society.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The violations of CEDAW by Belarus highlight the urgent need for action to protect women's rights and dignity. The state's systemic harsh repression and discrimination against women and girls demand accountability and international intervention. The international community must:

1. Pressure Belarus to immediately end gender-based repression and implement effective legal protections for women and girls. This includes the immediate release of female political prisoners, cessation of the practice of removing children from the families of socially and politically active women, ending all forms of political repression against women, and enacting changes in legislation and state policies to ensure the protection of women's rights.
2. Support civil society organizations advocating for gender equality and women's rights. Currently, such international support for Belarusian organizations fighting for the rights of women and girls is almost nonexistent. Leading Belarusian organizations known for fighting for the rights of women and girls, especially those helping Belarusian women who have become victims of political repression and discrimination in Belarus and in exile (such as the Belarusian Women's Fund under the leadership of Veronika Tsepka, the International Center for Civil Initiatives "Our House" under the leadership of Olga Karach, and many others), are stigmatized and marginalized. As a result, women and girls are deprived of their voice and representation, and their issues remain invisible at

the international level. They receive no help or support, including for minors in detention for non-political offenses.

3. Provide assistance and support for including Belarusian women's initiatives and organizations, which are under intense pressure from the Belarusian authorities, in international European feminist and women's networks and coalitions, particularly for exchanging best practices in the protection of women's and girls' rights. There is a need to help Belarusian women's organizations and initiatives break free from isolation. A detailed and thorough study of the violations of women's and girls' rights is essential, including regular and systematic monitoring, which is currently absent due to the crackdown on women's organizations and initiatives.