



## PORADŇA PRE OBČIANSKE A ĽUDSKÉ PRÁVA

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## Twenty years of fighting against forced sterilizations When will the Roma women survivors finally get justice?

Today marks twenty years since our organization, the Center for Civil and Human Rights (Poradňa), published the report *Body and Soul* and exposed the practice of forced sterilizations of Roma women in Slovakia. Unfortunately, Slovakia has yet to fully come to terms with this practice. Although in November 2021, the Slovak Government accepted its responsibility and formally apologized to the survivors, the aggrieved women are still waiting in vain for compensation. Poradňa takes this opportunity to call on the Slovak Government to urgently adopt legislation based on which all Roma women survivors can be effectively compensated by the State for their suffering.

Forced sterilizations of Roma women were carried out in former Czechoslovakia and in Slovakia between 1966 and 2004. The expose of this practice in the report [Body and Soul: Forced Sterilizations and Other Attacks on the Reproductive Freedom of Roma in Slovakia](#), published on **23 January 2003**, provoked heated reactions from political leaders, the medical community and the general public at the time. The report spearheaded extensive long-term efforts by Poradňa and many Roma women, victims of the practice, to bring a reckoning to Slovakia for this illegal practice once and for all.

**Barbora Bukovská**, one of the authors of the *Body and Soul* and founder of the Centre for Civil and Human Rights, said in response to the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the report's publication:

*January 23rd was chosen as the date of the publication of Body and Soul for a reason. In January 1990, Charter 77 issued its own document, "On the Sterilization of Roma Women" which, for the first time, exposed the practice of forced and involuntary sterilization of Roma women and called for its elimination. The fact that this practice continued on our territory with impunity is a disgrace for Slovakia and for all of us.*

*In recent years, much has changed for the better in Slovakia thanks to the work of Poradňa and the work of many forcibly sterilized Roma women. It is sad, however, that their fight still continues. Compensating all women who have been illegally sterilized in Slovak hospitals is our legal and moral duty. Nothing will compensate the victims for the suffering they have endured. However, compensation may bring them at least partial recognition and satisfaction from the state.*

**Veronika Duždová**, a Roma woman activist and one of the survivors working with Poradňa, commented:

*We, Roma women, are glad that the Slovak Government apologized to us in 2021. But the Slovak Government must compensate us as soon as possible. We have been waiting for this for more than 20 years. Sadly, some of the women, who fought together with us, will not live to see such a day as they are no longer with us. It is time for the state to get to grips with it.*

**Vanda Durbáková**, an attorney cooperating with Poradňa who has been representing the Roma women survivors of this practice in court proceedings, adds:

*At Poradňa, we appreciate the current efforts of the Slovak state authorities to finally draft legislation on compensation and we fully support it. The adoption of this law cannot be delayed any longer. We call on the Slovak Government to introduce it as soon as possible. This law must subsequently be approved by the Slovak Parliament in the current parliamentary term. The Government must also provide complete support to all survivors so that they can realistically obtain compensation.*

*Ensuring justice for forcibly sterilized women is a matter of elementary justice and of coming to terms with a serious systemic violation of women's rights. In a democratic society, the support for this law should not be a subject of dispute and must therefore go across a whole political spectrum.*

The conclusions of the report Body and Soul were based on 230 interviews conducted with Roma women from socially disadvantaged communities in Eastern Slovakia. Most of the women suspected that they had been sterilized without their prior informed consent. Most of them had been sterilized during childbirth by a cesarean section when they were forced to sign a “request for sterilization” form, or they were subsequently told by medical staff that they had already been sterilized. The report also documented cases of sterilization of underage Roma girls without the consent of their guardians, as required by Slovak law.

In Body and Soul, Poradňa called on Slovak state authorities to thoroughly investigate cases of illegal sterilizations, provide access to justice for Roma women harmed by it, and take effective measures to eradicate the practice.

The publication of the report contributed substantially to the adoption of the new Health Care Act of 2004 in Slovakia, which introduced to the Slovak law the concept of informed consent into health care, including a specific provision on informed consent to sterilization.

At the same time, the Slovak Government refused to accept its responsibility for this illegal practice, properly investigate it and effectively compensate its victims. Several injured women, with the legal support of Poradňa, sought justice in Slovak courts, which rejected their claims. In 2011-2012, some of them finally obtained [justice and compensation](#) from the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. The European Court confirmed the serious violation of their rights and ordered the Slovak government to compensate them. In the following years, in two cases, the [Slovak courts also adequately compensated](#) two forcibly sterilized Roma women.

In line with the recommendations of a number of international human rights institutions and the Slovak Ombudsperson, Poradňa will continue its key efforts to ensure that all victims are thoroughly compensated based on the law. We shall advocate for the adoption of legislation that would make this possible. The Slovak Government must ensure that it does not take another twenty years for our efforts to culminate.

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In case of interest, we can also arrange contact for illegally sterilized Roma women.

**The Centre for Civil and Human Rights (Poradňa pre občianske a ľudské práva)** is a non-governmental organization dedicated to the protection of human rights and freedoms, with a focus on the protection of minority rights and protection against discrimination. It has long been focusing on issues of discrimination against the Roma ethnic group in various areas of life in Slovakia. It also focuses on the protection of reproductive rights and the issue of police violence. In its work, the Counselling Centre develops a method of strategic litigation in cases of discrimination and violation of the human rights of minorities. It provides free legal advice in selected cases of human rights violations and free legal representation in proceedings before Slovak courts and the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. It also carries out field monitoring, and advocacy activities in relation to state institutions and conducts educational activities in the field of protection against discrimination for the professional and lay public. Website: [www.poradna-prava.sk](http://www.poradna-prava.sk)

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