

**United Nations Human Rights Council, 52nd Session
27 February to 31 March 2023
Item 3 – General debate
Speaker: Humanists UK representative: Richy Thompson¹**

This statement is made jointly by Humanists UK and Humanists Malta.

In light of the repeal last year of *Roe v Wade*, which ended the constitutional right to abortion in the US, we remain concerned over global backsliding on women's rights to bodily autonomy.² This is in direct opposition to the promotion and defence of gender equality, as well as the equal rights of men and women to freedom of religion or belief (or FoRB).

In 2020, Poland's Constitutional Tribunal enabled a near-total abortion ban.³ We see Ukrainian refugees in Poland seeking an abortion facing insurmountable barriers to access the healthcare they need, even in cases of rape.⁴

In Malta, we are pleased that the Government has taken steps to ease restrictions on its abortion laws, although it will remain far too restrictive. We echo the call of Maltese activists to expand the law further to include, at a minimum, cases of rape or incest, or foetal anomaly.⁵ We are disappointed to learn of the open letter to the Prime Minister, signed by a small number of UK parliamentarians, opposing the proposals.⁶

Dr Ahmed Shaheed, the previous Special Rapporteur on FoRB, states that freedom of religion or belief guarantees women's rights to bodily autonomy and conscientious choice, and that FoRB cannot be invoked to support intolerant and patriarchal claims that deny women and girls their sexual and reproductive health and rights.⁷

We call on states to reaffirm this position and to repeal discriminatory laws that restrict women's and girls' full and equal enjoyment of all human rights.

Thank you.

¹ Humanists UK is the operating name of the British Humanist Association.

² BBC News Online, 'Roe v Wade: US Supreme Court ends constitutional right to abortion' 24 June 2022. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-61928898>

³ Reuters, 'Polish court ruling amounts to almost total ban on abortion', 22 October 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/poland-abortion-idINKBN2772LQ>

⁴ *The Guardian*, "'Declare it to a doctor, and it's over": Ukrainian women face harsh reality of Poland's abortion laws', 10 May 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/may/10/ukrainian-women-face-harsh-reality-poland-abortion-laws>

⁵ *The Guardian*, 'Malta drafts law allowing abortion if mother's life or health at risk', 21 November 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/21/malta-drafts-law-allowing-abortion-if-mothers-life-or-health-at-risk>

⁶ *Times of Malta*, 'UK parliamentarians write to Abela over "extreme concern" about abortion laws' *Times of Malta*, 26 November 2022. <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/three-uk-mps-lords-write-abela-extreme-concern-abortion-laws.997614>

⁷ Humanists UK, 'Government backtracks to support global abortion rights', 2 December 2022. <https://humanists.uk/2022/12/02/government-backtracks-to-support-global-abortion-rights/>