



**CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN WOMEN'S NETWORK FOR
SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS**

Warsaw, 9 November 2009

Dear Participants of the third Equality Summit, 16–17 November 2009, Stockholm, Sweden

I am writing to you on behalf of ASTRA - the Central and Eastern European Women's Network for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights - on the occasion of the Summit on Equality held on 16 and 17 November 2009 in Stockholm.

ASTRA is a network of 29 NGOs from throughout the region, including NGOs in both member states of the EU and in neighboring countries that works to promote and advance sexual and reproductive health and rights at the regional and international level, including at the European Union.

With this letter, we would like to ensure you that ASTRA Network truly appreciates the important role of the meetings to promote equal rights and equal opportunities for all in the European Union, and to share knowledge and experiences in order to develop more effective ways of counteracting all forms of discrimination. ASTRA believes that the further development of EU equality and anti-discrimination policies are absolutely key to achieving a social Europe closer to its citizens, and to ensure the construction of a Union based on social cohesion and solidarity.

As the forthcoming summit (following its predecessors in Berlin 2007 and in Paris last year), has as its main theme cooperation for equality between different stakeholders and different levels and is supposed to give fresh impetus to anti-discrimination efforts by strengthening the gender equality longer perspective in EU antidiscrimination policies ASTRA encourages you to develop concrete strategies that should be put in place to make actions for equality between women and men and gender sensitive actions an integral part within the different strands of the EU non-discrimination action.

At ASTRA we believe, that rather than merging policy areas, based on an insufficient analysis of the issues at stake, the EU institutions should focus on how to preserve and develop EU legislation and institutional mechanisms for equality between women and men,

while at the same time developing and strengthening EU's anti-discrimination actions and institutional mechanisms.

Women's sexual and reproductive rights are still not enough respected and in several of the EU Member States even repressed and/or denied. There is no doubt that if women are not able to exercise SRHR, which should be considered as absolutely basic right in a healthy democratic society, they will never be equal. The inequality in women's sexual and reproductive health and rights among Member States still reflects the disparity in access to health between women and men and in general terms between the poorer citizens of the new Member States and the old 15. The EU should recognize that some Member States such as Bulgaria, Lithuania, Poland and Slovakia continue to ignore these problems and face massive poor sexual and reproductive health outcomes for adolescents.

In these countries the underground illegal abortion levels are extremely high and the conditions in which the procedures are performed endanger health and life of women. The high abortion numbers performed outside the legal system reflect on the lack of modern birth control and sexuality education in these countries. Reduction of this illegal sector could be achieved only by introduction of prevention measures not by its criminalization as currently exercised by governments in these countries.

In some of these countries, besides labor codes, there are no relevant anti-discrimination legislations. The existing antiabortion laws deprive women of health and life protection measures that they are entitled to. This lack of relevant legislation and European standards is often explained by region's governments that a relevant debate within society is still in progress and a consensus between various groups has not been reached. As in many of these countries, this process has been heavily influenced by the Catholic Church with the governing political parties depended on the Church's support, some of the governments have given up the initiative and the discourse is either blocked or driven by Church's policies. As a result prominent civil society groups working in this field have lost trust in public institutions and in some cases decline to work with them.

One of such examples is the behavior of Polish Commissioner for Civil Rights Protection (Ombudsman) with whom in the past the civil society used to work in cases of women's rights violations and discrimination. Recently, the Ombudsman has publicly stated that he "doesn't like feminists as they do not like other women... and that feminists are unfulfilled women." Despite the fact that he quite quickly apologized for this statement, being even

criticized by his own political party, such statement disqualify him as an Ombudsman, who is supposed to protect right of all citizens, including feminists.

Regarding the status of elaborating Polish Equal Status of Women and Man Law that has been in progress for a number of years, the current government Plenipotentiary for equal status achieved that this Law would not be passed. In turn, there will be several changes of other Laws that will result in transfer of all equality related competences to the Ombudsman office. As a result Poland will not have a dedicated anti-discrimination office.

Inability to enjoy sexual and reproductive rights stems from discrimination based on gender. This issue should be addressed in social policies of the EU including the new anti-discriminatory directive. Therefore, we are concerned that the new anti-discriminatory directive includes provisions that might have negative impact on the prevention of gender discrimination related the reproductive health issues and may seriously delay the achievement of gender equality in Europe. We believe that negative references to reproductive rights included in the draft of the directive should be removed.

Astra Network would like to also propose that during your discussion you address the following issues that have impact on equality status:

- Elimination of discrimination regarding access to reproductive and sexual health.
- Development of common standards, guidelines, best practices, transfers of know-how, experience and expertise in the area of gender equality policy for Member States.
- EU and Member States should ensure functioning of educational programs that provide factual information and do not promote myths, fears, or misconceptions. Such programs should raise awareness among young people concerning the importance of medical tests, contraception, STI's (including HIV/AIDS) prevention as well as understanding of the abortion issue.
- Investments in most disadvantaged regions of Europe and parts of countries.

The management of anti-discrimination policies is an exclusive competence of the Member States. Nevertheless, the EU has been taking initiatives to encourage the improvement of gender mainstreaming in the EU. With the Eastern enlargement of the EU, more attention is being drawn to the fact that the women of the less wealthy CEE countries have less legal representation than those in Western Europe. In addition to the East-West gap in equal treatment, differences in health between socio-economic groups have increased in many

countries as determinants such as education, employment and lifestyle especially affect the women. These gaps should be addressed at the EU level.

I truly believe these issues will also be addressed during the forthcoming Equality Summit. We thank you for your attention to these issues.

On behalf of ASTRA Network

Yours sincerely,



Wanda Nowicka
ASTRA Coordinator

ASTRA members:

Albania - Albanian Family Planning Association, Armenia - Women's Rights Center, Azerbaijan - Center "Women and Modern World", Belarus - Women's Independent Democratic Movement of Belarus, Bulgaria - Bulgarian Family Planning and Sexual Health Association, Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation, Gender Education, Research and Technologies, Croatia - B.a.b.e. (Be Active, Be Emancipated), CESI - Center for Education and Counselling of Woman, Women's Centre for Sexuality and the Prevention, Research, and Combating of Sexual Violence - Women's Room, Georgia - Women's Center , Kazakhstan - The Legal Center for Women's Initiatives "Sana Sezim", Lithuania - Family Planning and Sexual Health Association, Latvia - Latvia's Association for Family Planning And Sexual Health, Macedonia - Sheltar Centar, Moldova - Reproductive Health Service Center, Poland Federation for Women and Family Planning, Romania - The East European Institute of Reproductive Health, AnA: Society for Feminist Analysis, Russia - Institute of State and Law, Russian Academy of Sciences, ANO "Women's Health", Novogorod Gender Center, Slovakia - Pro – choice, Ukraine - Women Health and Family Planning, Charitable SALUS Foundation, ASTRA ASSOCIATE MEMBERS: Center for Reproductive Rights, Albania, Romania, Women's Link Worldwide/Colombia.

ASTRA Secretariat, ul. Nowolipie 13/15, 00-150 Warsaw, Poland, ph/fax 48.22.635 9395, www.astra.org.pl