



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

Warsaw, 29 January 2009

EU ministers for Family Affairs

Dear Ministers,

I am writing regarding the forthcoming meeting of the EU Ministers for Family Affairs under the Czech Presidency, 4-5 February 2009 in Prague.

ASTRA is a regional network of NGOs and individuals advocating for sexual and reproductive health and rights in Central and Eastern Europe (SRHR). Our aim is to raise awareness about status of women's health and choices, best international standards and commitments and to improve European policies in this respect. In our work we pay special attention to young people and other underserved groups. ASTRA is monitoring and reporting the status of implementation of these and other gender-related policies on European Union level.

The Czech Presidency faces many challenges: financial crisis, economic recession, energy challenge and climate change issues plus the parliamentary elections make for a very specific term at the helm of Europe. The Czech Republic will be asked to show responsiveness and leadership. Its term will also be marked by the twentieth anniversary of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe and the nomination of the new Commission President. The schedule is also pre-determined by the Lisbon Treaty: choosing the new European Council President as well as the EU Foreign Minister might be on the agenda.

Regarding the issues to be addressed during the current meeting i.e. forms of early childcare in relation to the implementation of the Barcelona objectives - ASTRA Network advocates for policies that help young people and families we remain, however, very concerned about Czech Presidency plans to review the Barcelona objectives in the field of pre-school childcare services.

We recommend that the whole of Europe works towards affordable, accessible and quality childcare for all who want it – as it help precisely those who we care most about – our children and our families. Allowing parents to be able to raise their children is by all means advisable, however, this choice should be accompanied by creation of a system that will safeguard their professional development and encourage sharing responsibilities at home. There is still a huge imbalance between men and women in the sharing of domestic and family responsibilities, leaving women – much more so than men – to opt for flexible working arrangements or even give up work altogether. Forcing out highly professional women from the labour market does not benefit neither the economy nor the family. Childcare facilities allow parents to take a job and keep it, thereby improving their quality of life and removing a major obstacle to their freedom to organize their time.

Using this opportunity we would also communicate our disappointed by the fact that in the entire Work Programme of the Czech Presidency there is no single case of terms "women" or "gender mainstreaming" being used or applied in any form or purpose. We remain hopeful that this will change.

ASTRA truly believes that you will take into account our position regarding the Barcelona objectives and that you will be able to address our concern regarding the role of “women” during the Czech Presidency of the European Union. We are looking forward to work with you during the next six months and beyond.

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.

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