



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

Warsaw, 20 November 2009

Re. Meeting of the Council of the European Union (Education, Youth and Culture), Brussels, 26-27.11.2009

Dear Participants,

ASTRA Network expects that during the current meeting of the Council of the European Union - Education, Youth and Culture you take an action to bring down barriers existing in the field of sexual and reproductive health education in Europe.

ASTRA is a regional network of NGOs and individuals advocating in a collective voice for sexual and reproductive health and rights in Central and Eastern Europe. Our aim is to raise awareness about women's health and reproductive choices and to build capacity, knowledge and experience of the societies and to improve policy standards in this respect. ASTRA is monitoring and reporting the status of implementation of gender-related policies on European Union level. ASTRA works closely with ASTRA Youth, which is a network of young activists working towards rights of young people and other underserved groups.

ASTRA Network together with ASTRA Youth believes that the EU has a duty and an obligation to address the issue of comprehensive sexuality education. 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 youth.

With this letter we would also like to draw your attention to young people's situation in our region - Central and Eastern Europe, as well as in Balkan Countries, which is far from satisfactory. The lack of compulsory and comprehensive Sexuality Education at schools has vast and severe consequences for the region, especially for young people, who lack access to basic knowledge on how to protect themselves against Sexually Transmitted Infections including HIV/AIDS, as well as unwanted pregnancy. The rates of teenage pregnancies and teenage abortions are significantly higher in the CEE region and Balkan Countries than in Western Europe. The high abortion numbers performed outside the legal system reflect on the lack of modern birth control and sexuality education in these countries.

In Poland, the introduction of sexuality education process has been heavily influenced by the Catholic Church. With the most recent governing political parties depended on the Church's support, their leaderships 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 filed have lost trust in public institutions and in some cases decline to work with them. Inquired about the discriminatory way in which the issue of homosexuality is presented in schools (the ban on relevant discussion, textbooks describing homosexuality as a shameful disability) the Polish government has presented the EU guidebook "Compass. A Manual on human Rights

Education with Young People” translated into Polish language and stated that schools can use it for educational purposes (this guidebook was banned in Poland by the previous government of Law and Justice Minister of Education.

Youth that have experienced some type of sexuality education in school indicated that in numerous cases people running these activities are incompetent and relied their own private views instead of an objective, neutral science. Lack of open and free discussion as well as changing curricula of activities to other than programmed have also been pointed out.

Despite the fact that Poland is European Union member, it is still possible to hear in some schools that homosexuals should be isolated and treated, rape is a punishment for promiscuity and contraception Satan’s idea. Some of the teachers still teach stereotypes about gender roles.

Having this in mind, Astra Network would propose that during your discussion you also stress the need for EU and Member States to introduce reliable, objective and impartial sexuality education in schools, realized by competent and trained specialists. Such education should include all aspects of pubescence of girls and boys, prevention of sexually transmitted diseases, modern contraception techniques, education about assertiveness and sexual preferences as well as raise awareness among young people concerning the importance of medical tests. Furthermore, you should strive towards elimination of discrimination regarding access to reproductive and sexual health.

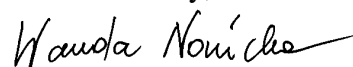
Astra Network believes that EU should invest in such education in most disadvantaged European regions.

ASTRA Youth believes that in order to address this urgent problem an immediate action should be undertaken. ASTRA Youth encourages you to address these issues during the upcoming session of the Education, Youth and Culture Council.

Addressing accessibility of sexuality education during the Education, Youth and Culture (EYC) Council’s session, will be an important step towards healthier European youth, and a milestone on the road to a Europe without barriers.

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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