



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

Warsaw, 10 May 2009

President Mrs. Miroslava Kopicová  
Minister for Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic  
Education, Youth and Culture Council (EYC) Brussels, 11-12.5.2009

As the Czech EU presidency programme is called "Europe without Barriers" ASTRA Network expects that during the current session 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.

In the WHO European Region, the contrast in health and health care status between the Western and the Eastern countries is a major area of concern. Thus, reducing regional gaps in health status and services should be treated a priority. Inequalities are most significant in the area of reproductive health, and adolescents constitute one of the specific target groups of global, regional and national reproductive health strategies. Regarding adolescents in the Eastern and Central European Region, the high number of induced abortions, the increase in sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS, and the growing number of sex workers indicate the need to develop and implement programmes addressing the specific needs of young people. Inequalities in access to information, knowledge and services addressing the sexual and reproductive health of adolescents are also to be tackled in the West, where young people with a migrant background, socially disadvantaged and poorly educated adolescents, and young girls are identified as special vulnerable groups at high risk of reproductive morbidity.

Youth and adults who do not have the necessary tools and information are unable to protect themselves. Well formulated education programmes arm youth with the tools they need to navigate a healthy lifestyle in today's sexualized world. Sexually educated youth fully understand the need to practice safer sex and are knowledgeable about use of effective protection measures. We therefore call on you to take steps towards establishing framework for cooperation between Member States in the area of sexuality education.

The WHO European Regional Strategy on Sexual and Reproductive Health (WHO 2001) underlines the need for a comprehensive framework and solidarity among member states to reduce regional inequalities. As the EU also aims at reducing these differences and the Education, Youth and Culture (EYC) Council has an unique opportunity to include the issue of young people's health in its key message to the European Council, and to stimulate exchange of information and experience in the area of young people's reproductive health and sexuality education among Member States by adopting the Education, Youth and Culture (EYC) Council's common position regarding these matters.

“To inform and educate youth and adolescents on all aspects of sexuality and reproduction, and to assist them in developing the life skills necessary to deal with these issues in a satisfying and responsible manner” is a principle granted by international documents (World Health Declaration 1998; Health21 - Copenhagen 1999, Cairo Conference 1994, UN Conference on Population and Development 1999).

ASTRA calls on you to achieve this goal by working towards (1) including education on sexuality and reproduction in all secondary school curricula; (2) implementation of educational programmes aiming at young people out of school; (3) provision of confidential, affordable Youth-Friendly Services, accessible without parental consent (one service for every 100,000 young people)<sup>1</sup>; (4) actively involving young people in all educational and service activities; (5) increasing the proportion of young people protecting themselves against unwanted pregnancy and STI transmission to at least 90%; and (6) reducing teenage pregnancy by between 20% (countries with a fairly low rate) and 50% (countries with a high rate).

To advance sexual and reproductive health of young people The Education, Youth and Culture (EYC) Council should enhance: (1) the use of interactive methods in sex education and starting it before young people become sexually active; (2) integration of SRH activities in comprehensive health and social programmes for young people; (3) focusing of sex education on knowledge, values and building behavioural skills; (4) inclusion of gender issues in IE&C activities, e.g. to focus programmes with girls on strengthening self-confidence and negotiation skills, and programmes with boys on their SRH needs and responsibilities; (5) development of materials for different age groups; (6) provision of services in places where large groups of young people meet; (7) training of health, education and other professionals for adolescents' SRH needs; and (8) education of parents on guiding young people's sexual development.

Youth sex education and the SRH of young people should be also addressed in other areas, such as in the field of reproductive choice, where proposed activities should, for example, introduce or to extend reproductive rights and family planning education in schools, universities, military services, and to remove legal obstacles to access to family planning services for minors.

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

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<sup>1</sup> WHO Regional Office for Europe, Regional Strategy 2001.

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.

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 and other sexual and reproductive health supplies 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", Novgorod 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, [nwanda@federa.org.pl](mailto:nwanda@federa.org.pl), [www.astra.org.pl](http://www.astra.org.pl)