



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

Warsaw, 25 February 2009

Ms Virginija Langbakk

Director Gender Equality Institute

Dear Ms Director,

On behalf of ASTRA Network, congratulations on your recent appointment to be Director of Gender Equality Institute. As the premier organization dealing with reproductive and sexual health and rights in Central and Eastern Europe and Commonwealth of Independent States, ASTRA Network stands ready to assist you in stressing the role of gender as an important component of the European Union Agenda.

ASTRA Network is a network of feminist organizations and activists, whose work collectively and individually promotes access to sexual and reproductive health and rights as a precondition of gender equality. *Gender equality cannot be achieved without guaranteeing women's sexual and reproductive health information and health services are essential for achieving the Beijing Platform for Action, the Cairo Program of Action and the Millennium Development Goals* (Declaration of the European Union Conference of Ministers of Gender Equality, Luxembourg, 4 February 2005). To narrow the social gap between women and men and ensure gender equity in health care, ASTRA Network promotes the development of policies and programmes that guarantee universal access to sexual and reproductive health services and the free exercise of sexual and reproductive rights. ASTRA is monitoring and reporting the status of implementation of gender-related policies on European Union level and it has long enjoyed an excellent working relationship with the European Union institutions, members of Parliament, DG SANCO and EPSCO. Through correspondence and written comments, public hearings and smaller, informal

meetings, ASTRA Network and some of the EU institutions have done more than keep the lines of communication open: we have demonstrated that progress toward common goals is possible when the both sides approach issues with candor, thoughtfulness, and professionalism. Although we may not always agree, ASTRA Network has no reservation in saying that a successful partnership has been forged between our organization and the EU bodies. We believe that the establishment of Gender Equality Institute will let us further collaborate to place gender equality on the EU Agenda.

Although gender equality is included in the discourse of mainstream development, in most European countries inequalities between women and men in the workplace, in political institutions and in the home have proven persistent. For all the valiant efforts that have been made, gender mainstreaming has largely failed live up to its promises. The dilution and depoliticisation of the 'gender agenda' as it has come to be taken up by European institutions calls for more attention to be paid to what it takes to make a difference to women's lives. Therefore the European Commission's reaching out to address gender equality through establishment of the Gender Equality Institute is a very positive development. We hope that working plan of the Institute will focus attention on reproductive health as an important area of eradication of gender inequalities. Without access to the means to regulate their fertility, there is little chance of women having the time and energy to participate in community affairs or politics until their children are grown up - unless they are of sufficiently elite status to be able to employ others to take care of their children and households for them. We expect that you, as a Director, will have that in mind while establishing priorities and driving the agenda of the Institute. We eagerly expected the publication of the Institute's Work Plan hoping that you plan to establish civil society consultative body to support the work of the Institute.

We hope that after reading this welcome message, you will visit our website or write to us to discuss any questions you may have about ASTRA Network, our work, and our hopes - including the ones geared toward improving status of women and their access to reproductive rights. To provide a bit more background about ourselves, we have enclosed a copy of our Bulletin, an electronic newsletter that we circulate via email at the beginning of every month, and that

will give you a sense of some recent or forthcoming ASTRA initiatives. For more information on our projects or recent/forthcoming activities, please visit our newly-redesigned website at www.astra.org.pl. As you become more familiar with us, we invite and hope that you make the ASTRA Network your professional network and intellectual home in the coming years.

Once again, congratulations on becoming Director of the Gender Equality Institute. We look forward to a long and worthwhile working relationship. If you wish to discuss any of the issues discussed in this letter, or if we can be of any assistance to you, please let us know.

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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