



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

Warsaw, 12 February 2009

Re. Education, Youth and Culture Council (EYC) Brussels, 16.2.2009

Mr. Ondřej Liška

Minister for Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic  
President of the Council of the European Union - Education, Youth and Culture

Dear Mr. President

As during the 2923rd session of the Council of the European Union - Education, Youth and Culture you will preside over the Council's adoption of Key messages to the Spring European Council in the field of education and training, ASTRA Network would like to present you recommendations and suggestions regarding these Key messages in the field of Youth education.

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. Through ASTRA Youth our young members work 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.

We therefore call on you to include in the **Key messages** a demand that the whole of Europe works towards affordable, comprehensive **Sexuality Education**, which instructs youth on how to protect themselves and how to modify their behaviors to make healthy choices. 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 effective contraception use.

Substantial evidence of the effectiveness of comprehensive **Sexuality Education** for youth is widely available. It has been also scientifically proved that access to **Sexuality Education** does not result in increased sexual activity among youth. Furthermore, it has been confirmed that this type of education:

- addresses both abstinence and age-appropriate, medically accurate information about contraception. It is also developmentally appropriate, introducing information on relationships, decision-making, assertiveness, and skill building to resist social/peer pressure, depending on grade-level;
- it is one of the most successful proven strategies to fighting HIV, other STIs, and premature teenage pregnancy, three critical health concerns for adolescents. In many areas where HIV infection rates are dropping, it is primarily because young men and women are being given the tools and the incentives to adopt safe behavior through sexual health education programmes;
- it breaks down gender stereotypes and encourages equal responsibility and participation for both men and women;
- it is effective, does not promote sexual risks, teaches the importance of having choices and caring about outcomes;
- addresses risky behaviors by helping young people understand who they are and what they can be;
- it empowers young people to make responsible decisions and enables to be in charge of their life.

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 Diseases 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 include the following issues in your **Key messages** to the Spring European Council in the field of education.

- Provide **Sexuality Education** at schools that should be scientifically based, non – biased, and free on any ideology. The curriculum has to conform to scientific and medical standards, as well as human rights standards indicated by the United Nations and the European Union.
- **Sexuality Education** has to encompass information on sexual and reproductive health and rights with a particular focus on sexuality, gender and sexual life, contraception, protection against Sexually Transmitted Infections incl. HIV/AIDS, promotion of safer sexual behaviour, and sexual and reproductive health problems.
- Ensure capacity building of professional educators that would be qualified to teach **Sexuality Education**.
- Evaluate textbooks and educational programmes with regard to their accuracy with the scientific standards of sexual and reproductive health. Ensure that both of them include building skills of assertive behaviour in risky situations.

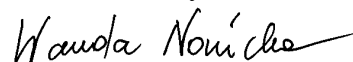
- Monitor the quality of **Sexuality Education** at schools, as well as young people's needs in order to match their expectations.
- Cooperate with Non – Governmental Organizations that provide quality **Sexuality Education** including peer education.
- Provide access to youth friendly sexual and reproductive health care and services that respect the rights of privacy and confidentiality. This will certainly lead to the significant decrease in teenage pregnancy rates.
- Ensure youth' participation on every level of decision – making process in regard to sexuality education, so their needs and expectations are met.
- Providing information through **Sexuality Education** is therefore about finding out what young people already know and adding to their existing knowledge and correcting any misinformation they may have. It is important to provide information which corrects mistaken beliefs. Without correct information young people can put themselves at greater risk.
- Young people get information about sex and sexuality from a wide range of sources including each other, through the media including advertising, television and magazines, as well as leaflets, books and websites which are intended to be sources of information about sex and sexuality.
- They need to have information about the physical and emotional changes associated with puberty and sexual reproduction, including fertilization and conception and about sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS.
- When should sex education start? **Sexuality Education** that works starts early, before young people reach puberty, and before they have developed established patterns of behaviour. The precise age at which information should be provided depends on the physical, emotional and intellectual development of the young people as well as their level of understanding. What is covered and also how, depends on who is providing the **Sexuality Education**, when they are providing it, and in what context, as well as what the individual young person wants to know about. It is important not to delay providing information to young people but to begin when they are young. Providing basic information provides the foundation on which more complex knowledge is built up over time. This also means that **Sexuality Education** has to be sustained.

ASTRA Network and ASTRA Youth see the 2923rd session of the Council of the European Union - Education, Youth and Culture that you will preside over as an opportunity to address these of utmost importance issues.

We believe that your leadership of the European Council in the field of education and training will result in inclusion and enforcement of **Sexuality Education in the whole of Europe for the benefit of the European youth and a healthy European society.**

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.

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