

Mr. Wolfgang Schüssel
Federal Chancellor of Austria
Austrian Presidency of the European Union

14 April 2006

Dear Chancellor Schüssel,

I'm writing to you on behalf of ASTRA – Central and Eastern European Women's Network for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights. ASTRA consists of twenty six organizations in Europe and works to advance and promote sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) in CEE region by bridging the gaps between women's issues, health issues and human rights issues, as well as by monitoring states' compliance with international commitments made in Cairo, Beijing and in Millennium Development Goals.

I am writing to you regarding the 2006 UNGASS Review of the implementation of the Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS which will take place in New York on 31 May-2 June 2006.

ASTRA would like to encourage the European Union to continue assent the HIV/AIDS as a key priority for policy makers in the EU, Applicant and Neighboring Countries and strengthen efforts for highlighting the linkages between growing HIV/AIDS pandemic and the lack of reliable SRHR information and services, especially in the region of Central and Eastern Europe.

ASTRA would like to underline that good policies and programs in the area of SRHR respecting human rights, constitute part of the solution in preventing further spread of HIV infections. HIV/AIDS pandemic are caused, among others, by insufficient access to sexuality information, education and services for young people.

ASTRA urges you to address these issues during the UN Review Meeting and to strengthen further commitments to more effective prevention of HIV/AIDS to be strongly interlinked with sexual and reproductive health and rights policies and programs.

ASTRA would like to draw your attention to the growing rates of HIV infections among women and girls in every region of the world (often higher than among men) which is widely recognized. This is caused by denial and neglect of the women's and young girls' rights, gender inequalities, social and cultural factors, pervasive violence and biology.

ASTRA urges the European Union to:

- Encourage the Member States, Applicant and Neighboring Countries to provide comprehensive sexuality information, education and services that promote sexual and reproductive health and rights and provide accurate information for adolescents and young people on sexuality and reproduction related issues, including HIV/AIDS;
- Provide people living in the European Union, Applicant and Neighboring Countries with easy access to female and male condoms as main protection against HIV infections and enable the development and dissemination of microbicides and other women-initiated, prevention technologies, and vaccines;
- Strengthen the protection for HIV positive people from violence, stigma and discrimination;
 - Strengthen HIV/AIDS Programs with emphasis on women's health and rights:
 - Enable women to exercise their right to unrestricted access to confidential voluntary counseling and testing (VCT), including support for the choice not to be tested; provide protection from violence, stigma, and discrimination that may result from disclosure of their status;

- Increase and utilize funds earmarked for care to reduce women's disproportionate burden of care;
- Support women's economic empowerment in order to reduce their vulnerability.
- Ensure that adequate founding resources, which enable realization of the points above, are taken into account in the new Financial Perspectives 2007-2013.

ASTRA urges you to take all these issues into consideration and address them during the UNGASS Review. We hope that the Review will significantly contribute to the achievement of the goal of universal access to prevention, treatment and care in HIV/AIDS – equal for women and men.

ASTRA believes that partnership and stronger collaboration between the European Union and NGOs can help reduce HIV infections in Europe and in the world.

Sincerely,

On behalf of ASTRA,
Wanda Nowicka
Polish Federation for Women and Family Planning
ASTRA Secretariat