



**ASTRA Network and ASTRA Youth Narrative Report  
January 2016 – December 2016**

**IMPACT**

This year has been dominated by the attempts to limit women’s rights, especially reproductive rights and the right to safe and legal abortion. The harsh climate surrounding sexual and reproductive health and rights has thickened in the last years and currently we are witnessing an urgent need to collectively react to the backlash on women’s rights. Nevertheless this year has been a year of continued empowerment of ASTRA Network and currently the organizations is regarded as an expert on women’s SRHR in the Central and Eastern European region.

During the “Black Protest” in Poland ASTRA Secretariat served as knowledge bank for people interested in the international obligations towards women’s health and rights and supported the grass root movement in Poland in any way possible, also by launching an international solidarity action on social media that caught great interest and contributed to ASTRA’s impact on recognition of women’s reproductive rights in the Region. ASTRA members also [personally engaged in the “Black Protest”](#) in October when the second round of the Polish Women’s Strike took place at the same as the ASTRA members met in Warsaw for their annual meeting to discuss the current threats to reproductive rights in the region and ways of addressing them. A joint statement on the status of reproductive rights in the region is in process and will be published by end of this year.

ASTRA Secretariat continues to be hosted by its Polish member and one of the founding organizations – the Federation for Women and Family Planning in Warsaw, Poland, where the ASTRA Network Coordinator operates. Currently the network consists of 39 [member organisations](#) from 21 countries, with regularly updated website and social media accounts: [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#). ASTRA Youth continues to be part of the ASTRA Network with 17 member organisations and active accounts on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

## **I. Results of ASTRA Network advocacy at regional and international levels**

- i. ASTRA contributed to increasing visibility of the region by submitting a [statement](#) to the 60<sup>th</sup> session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women and by providing input to the [Young Feminist Caucus Statement](#).
- ii. ASTRA and ASTRA Youth counteracted the developments in Poland by joining a coalition with You Act and CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality to advance young people's voices on reproductive rights. The group engaged in a series of advocacy actions on European level to support Polish fight for reproductive rights. The [Joint Advocacy Statement and Call for Action](#) submitted by this group to the Polish Prime Minister was endorsed by over 50 non-governmental organizations and called Polish government to comply with its human rights obligations towards women. Additionally, to raise awareness about women's and girl's rights to safe and legal abortion the group developed a [Factsheet](#) on access to safe and legal abortion from a European perspective. The coalition also contributed with a statement on the draft plans to restrict access to emergency contraception in Poland, the [statement](#) was prepared in cooperation with the European Consortium for Emergency Contraception.
- iii. Due to ASTRA's advocacy several institutions and Members of Parliament have come forward with solidarity and support statements in connection to the threat of further tightening of the law on abortion in Poland, among them was the [European Parliamentary Forum](#), [Catholics for Choice](#), [the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly](#) and parliamentarians from Lithuania, UK, Germany and Austria.

## **II. Regional and international cooperation**

- i. As a result of the 2015 ["Plovdiv Call to Action"](#) pointing to the vast, mostly financial, challenges posed to non-governmental organisations in our region ASTRA had been invited to the [Women Deliver Conference](#) in May in Copenhagen to hold a panel on the „Threats to Reproductive Health and Rights in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia” and ASTRA Youth to the [13<sup>th</sup> AWID Forum](#) held in September to talk about the “Healthy signposts on bumpy roads to safe futures: youth SRHR realities in Central and Eastern Europe”.
- ii. ASTRA contributed to the work of the UN High Level Political Forum with a joint paper with IPPF EN, EuroNGOs and Countdown 2015 Europe on the [“Four priorities for the HLPF 2016 – Ensuring that No One is left behind”](#).
- iii. ASTRA Youth contributed to the discussion on abortion stigma and abortion among young women by providing input to the toolkit [“Speak my language”: Abortion Storytelling in Eastern Europe from a Youth Perspective.”](#)
- iv. ASTRA Youth was a partner in the “Youth in Power – Developing a Youth Strategy for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights” project with You Act, Y-Safe and Y-PEER

that covers Council of Europe and Central Asia countries. The strategy meeting took place in Kiev, Ukraine on December 3-6 and was preceded by developing and translating into national languages the [online survey](#) collecting youth views on SRHR (the study was available in 9 languages in total: English, Azerbaijani, Armenian, Georgian, Greek, Lithuanian, Polish, Russian, Ukrainian). The youth strategy is currently under development and will conclude by March 2017.

- v. ASTRA and ASTRA Youth participated as speakers and experts together with You Act and CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality in a webinar held on December 20th on sharing experiences and lessons learned from the youth-led advocacy for abortion rights in Poland.
- vi. ASTRA members were engaged in preparing NGO submission to the UN Universal Periodic Review at the Human Rights Council as part of a cooperation with the Sexual Rights Initiative for Moldova, Lithuania, Hungary and Latvia.
- vii. ASTRA Youth continues to be part of the European and Central Asia Youth Alliance that works towards a joint strategy on improving Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights.
- viii. ASTRA continues to be part of the Coordinating Committee of the Civil Society Platform to Promote SRHR Beyond 2015.

### III. Recognition and outreach

- i. Due to the developments in Poland where in April a draft civic bill aiming to ban abortion had been announced ASTRA initiated a social media solidarity action entitled "[Show Solidarity with Polish women](#)" which aimed to empower women in Poland in their fight for reproductive rights and raise international awareness on the situation in Poland. The [photographs](#) of people from all around the world with the slogan *#SolidarityWithPolishWomen* were collected and shared on social media through various channels and caught major interest. It was also documented in Polish media ([example](#)) with the narrative of how people, especially women, from around the world, support Polish women and how women's rights are universal. As another result of this action ASTRA's visibility on social media increased in big numbers and the photos continued to be collected at various occasions, i.e. the [EuroNGOs conference](#) in October held in Paris.
- ii. The [monthly bulletin](#) continues to play a critical role as an important source of information regarding SRHR in the region. It is distributed to six list serves reaching over 2 500 subscribers. It also receives steadily more input from the members and the "Member of the month" section has proven itself to be a space for celebration of the member organizations' and their work.
- iii. ASTRA continues to be active on social media and ensures up to date news on its [website](#), [Facebook fanpage](#) and [Twitter](#) accounts. These have become reputable sources of information with a steadily growing number of followers and citations.

- iv. Strengthened visibility of ASTRA Network and ASTRA Youth members and Network's position of regional expert are results of, among others, the advocacy actions undertaken with CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality, You Act and ASTRA Youth – ASTRA and ASTRA Youth were featured twice on a live streaming of global news agency Al Jazeera from Warsaw around the developments connected to the abortion debate in Poland and the "Black Protest". ASTRA also provided input to various media releases about the issue and its members communicated news about the Polish protests to their local media, i.e. in Lithuania, Hungary and Croatia.

#### **IV. ASTRA Network Annual Meeting and Workshop, October 24-25, Warsaw**

##### **1. "ASTRA Network regional workshop for women's rights advocates: addressing threats to Reproductive Rights in Central and Eastern Europe"**

The "ASTRA Network regional workshop for women's rights advocates: addressing threats to Reproductive Rights in Central and Eastern Europe" aimed to recognize the influence of anti-choice opposition on the CEE region; identify the „hot spots" for anti-choice in the region and their main actors; exchange information and strengthen the collective movement to counteract the anti-choice opposition and develop joint statement to draw attention to the current situation in the CEE region. Amir Hodzic, co-author of the "Neo-conservative Threats to Sexual and Reproductive Health & Rights in the European Union" report was present at the meeting as an expert and provided substantial input through presentations and joint mapping exercises of the region and anti-choice activities. Deepened case studies were presented by representatives from Romania, Croatia and Poland and fruitful discussions and intelligence sharing took place during the meeting. A potential European Legislation Initiative was discussed among those of ASTRA members whose country is a member of the European Union. The Initiative is currently in preparation and would carry pro-choice messages and involve ASTRA members at all stages.

##### **Results:**

- 27 participants actively participated in the meeting and exchanged information through presentations and mutual discussion about the most current anti-choice initiatives and threats in the region and in their countries, as well as about the strategies and tools used by the anti-choice opposition;
- ASTRA member organizations became strengthened in ways of counteracting the anti-choice opposition and came forward with an agreement to use the agreed United Nations language on women's and human rights and not engage in discussions based on ideology or religion. For reference at the European Union level the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights would be the main reference. All strategies need to be adjusted to fit the country context.

- ASTRA members participated in the “Women’s Strike” in Warsaw by engaging in a street protest and giving interviews to the local media and also international which were present at the event.
- Participants and the Working Group consisting of six ASTRA representatives developed [joint ASTRA statement](#). It alerts the international community on the worrying situation in Central and Eastern European region in regard to women's and girls' Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
- ASTRA members agreed to support the European Legislation Initiative and support it with pro-choice messaging on national level.

## **2. ASTRA Network Strategic Meeting**

ASTRA members received an update on the status of the network, the number of members and the funding situation. Participants agreed that the network should be broadened in order to cover the Central and Eastern Europe more thoroughly and be able to advocate on behalf of a bigger constituency. The importance of being active online, using social media in order to advance ASTRA’s mission and activities and in order to bring more visibility to the Network’s member organization was also a topic of discussion. Another issue discussed was the proposal put forward by the EuroNGOs Steering Committee and Secretariat to join a Working Group, together with IPPF European Network, on a potential alliance that would cover the European region and secure joint work on SRHR for the future. ASTRA members discussed the issue and continued it online due to the inability to make a decision in such a limited group of representatives. The discussion was continued via the list serve. A needs assessment was carried through via a discussion and questionnaire.

Results:

- ASTRA members agreed to broaden the Network and reach out to potential new members in Serbia, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia;
- ASTRA members decided to not join the Working Group with EuroNGOs and IPPF EN on creating a potential overarching European Alliance.
- ASTRA members voiced a need for a workshop on human rights instruments and ways to use them in order to advance women’s rights and SRHR on national level.

## **CHALLENGES**

The unfavorable towards gender equality, sexuality education and reproductive rights climate together with the growing discrepancy between compliance with human rights standards on national level and the obligations to international agreements is they key challenge at this point. Vast anti-choice movement is currently supported by the right wing turn in politics in almost all countries of the region having a real impact on women’s and

adolescents' lives. The civil society needs to be mobilized to act together and show joint support for women's rights worldwide. Such was the case of the discussed abortion ban in Poland and great international support – women's groups and ASTRA members co-organized several demonstrations in the region to show their anger and protest against such women's rights violating plans. Such protests took place in Romania, Croatia, Armenia and many other locations worldwide.

## **CHANGES**

ASTRA and ASTRA Youth continue to work towards advancing the voices of women and adolescents from Central and Eastern Europe in support of sexual and reproductive health and rights and advocates for full implementation and recognition of these rights on regional and European level. ASTRA also engages in relevant discussions on the Sustainable Development Goals on gender equality and good health and wellbeing.