

Federation for Women and Family Planning on behalf of ASTRA and ASTRA Youth Networks welcomes the 47<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission on Population and Development priority theme “*Assessment of the status of implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development*”. Aware of the significance of the 1994 Cairo International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), its 20-year Programme of Action and its broad mandate on interrelationships between population, sustained economic growth and sustainable development, economic status and empowerment of women, we would like to reflect on the progress made and the challenges encountered.

We call upon the Governments to move the discussion beyond maternal and reproductive health. It is time to recognize and guarantee the full package of sexual and reproductive health and rights as fundamental part of the reaffirmed and expanded Programme of Action.

Central and Eastern Europe is a difficult region to classify. The political and economic transformation took place over 20 years ago, yet the reality remains complex and full of vast disparities as the region still struggles with growing inequality, the consequences of the financial crisis and the redirection of major donor funds towards other regions in the last decade. With some European Union Member States, Caucasus, Balkan and other countries that are none of the above, the region remains stuck somewhere between the Global North and Global South. Substantial growth of religious extremism troubles the region and poses a major challenge to the realisation of sexual and reproductive health and rights of women and girls. High influence of conservative forces on Members of Parliament throughout the region has resulted in multiple, often successful attempts to further limit women’s and young people’s reproductive rights and their access to basic reproductive health services.

If this extremism throughout Central and Eastern Europe is combined with other factors, such as lack of political will and commitment to address those issues, the burden of transformation and financial crisis as well as insufficient capacity of civil society still in development, the final picture hardly resembles the Western European reality. **No surprise the region has the highest sub-regional abortion rate in the world – 43 per 1,000 women**<sup>1</sup>. Many of the countries have not fully used the opportunity offered by the Programme of Action in order to enhance lives of their citizens.

ICPD Programme of Action calls for the promotion “*to the fullest extent*” of the health of young people and provision of services that are of good quality and sensitive to their needs and “*safeguarding the rights of adolescents to privacy, confidentiality, respect and informed consent*”<sup>2</sup>. However, the big wave of growing extremism has substantially affected the status of the implementation of the Cairo Programme of Action in the region in the recent years. Radicalising conservative forces successfully oppose the introduction of comprehensive

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<sup>1</sup> Population trends and Policies in the UNECE region. Outcomes, Policies and Possibilities, UNFPA, July 2013

<sup>2</sup> ICPD Programme of Action, paragraphs 6.7(a), 6.7(b), 6.15, 7.45

sexuality education, subsidized contraception, access to legal and safe abortion and other reproductive health services. Women and young people face countless obstacles in exercising their reproductive rights and accessing reproductive health services. They are denied the basic right to understand and control their own fertility, which results in forced parenthood and causes intersectional discrimination. They are not able to prevent unwanted pregnancies, plan to provide for their families or themselves, reduce the risks of work or school dropout or protect themselves from sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. Unintended pregnancies for girls mean the end of education and future income generation which drastically increases the risk of poverty, often accompanied by stigma and social exclusion. In far too many cases they lead to unsafe abortions that threaten their health or life. The suffering of women and girls from vulnerable groups is even more dramatic.

The lack of comprehensive sexuality education is the most burning issue concerning youth in the region and it is reflected in adolescent pregnancy rates and high HIV/AIDS prevalence among them. Despite the wide availability of World Health Organisation (WHO) standards on comprehensive sexuality education, they have not been implemented in any of the countries<sup>3</sup>. Today's adolescents and young people are left alone to struggle with the increasing pressure regarding sex with conflicting norms and widespread misconceptions, fears, discrimination and gender stereotypes on one hand, and with the lack of youth-friendly sources of reliable information on matters of sexuality, protection from sexually transmitted infections and sexual violence prevention on the other. **This reality and its harmful consequences are preventable to a large extent.**

The findings of the operational review of the ICPD Beyond 2014 indicate that there is still much work to be done to achieve universal access to reproductive health and rights and to ensure the wellbeing of women and girls.

In 2010 the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution which decided to extend the Cairo Programme of Action beyond 2014. It is therefore crucial for this continuation to be expanded in order to reflect on the changes and developments that happened in the world during the last 20 years, as well as to respond to the new burning issues that occurred within that time. Regional and thematic ICPD Conferences held worldwide provide an excellent source of information on the current status of the ICPD implementation and form recommendations for the move forward.

There has been growing understanding that it is crucial to include guarantees for sexual health and rights. Forward looking agenda developed at the Global Youth Forum and other conferences embrace the right of all persons to take free, informed, voluntary and responsible decisions on their sexuality<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup>**Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe.** A framework for policy makers, educational and health authorities and specialists, WHO Regional Office for Europe and BZgA, 2010

<sup>4</sup> Montevideo Consensus on Population and Development, Recommendation 34

The second reappearing issue has been the need to guarantee universal access to legal and safe abortion. The Cairo consensus states that termination of pregnancy should be safe in cases where it is legal<sup>5</sup>. It also urges all Governments *“to strengthen their commitment to women’s health, to deal with the health impact of unsafe abortion as a major public health concern”*<sup>6</sup>. According to WHO, any illegal abortion is unsafe by definition<sup>7</sup>. Sadly, it is the forced reality for many women in Central and Eastern Europe – particularly in Poland. Furthermore, it has been clear that penalization of the procedure does not reduce the number of abortions. Instead, it results in higher maternal mortality and morbidity<sup>8</sup>.

Therefore the continuation of ICPD needs to address the rights of women who need abortion where it is not legal through the call for decriminalization of this health procedure<sup>9</sup>.

No progress can be reached without reaching gender equality and women’s empowerment. However, these are impossible without universal recognition of sexual and reproductive rights and universal access to sexual and reproductive health, with particular focus on women and young people. Women are half the world’s population and today’s youth is the biggest generation of young people ever living on our planet. Guaranteeing fundamental rights of these groups and securing funds to improve the current situation globally are essential components of reaching substantial improvement in other aspects of development – education, health, inequality, violence and poverty reduction. The reaffirmed and expanded Programme of Action must have a gender-lens perspective and recognise that being able to make free, independent reproductive choices is an interlinked key to all the development doors.

ASTRA and ASTRA Youth urge the United Nations Member States to take forward the following actions:

1. Reaffirm the ICPD Programme of Action and adapt policies with respect to reproductive rights and sexual rights.
2. Realise the highest attainable standard of sexual and reproductive health: ensure comprehensive sexuality education in schools, develop and support youth friendly

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<sup>5</sup> ICPD Programme of Action, paragraph 8.25

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> World Health Organization, Department of Reproductive Health and Research, Safe abortion: technical and policy guidance for health systems. Second edition, 2012

<sup>8</sup> Montevideo Consensus on Population and Development, Section D

<sup>9</sup> Montevideo Consensus on Population and Development urges States *“to consider amending their laws, regulations, strategies and public policies relating to the voluntary termination of pregnancy”*, paragraph 42. Bali Declaration calls upon Governments to *“decriminalize abortion, and create and implement policies and programs that ensure young women have access to safe and legal abortion, pre- and post-abortion services, without mandatory waiting periods, requirements for parental and spousal notification and/or consent or age of consent”*. Bali Declaration, page 11.

services, ensure access to safe and legal abortion and access to affordable methods of modern contraception.

3. Ensure continued, committed and sustained investments in women's sexual and reproductive health and rights.
4. Guarantee the rights to sexual and reproductive health and the sexual and reproductive rights, especially those of adolescents, marginalized groups of women and those with diverse sexual orientation and gender identities.
5. Collect disaggregated gender and age sensitive data on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in order to support adequate progress assessment.