



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

**ASTRA CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN WOMEN'S NETWORK FOR SEXUAL  
AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS- STRATEGIC PLAN 2013-2018**

The 13 years' history of the ASTRA Network has proven that regional networking plays an important role in civil society's contributions to global political agendas at different international forums such as the United Nations, the European Union, or the Council of Europe. Networking amplifies the voices of civil society in a world where transnational institutions play increasingly important roles, not only in the global arena, but also in national policies and programs. Civil society needs to unite beyond borders, build partnerships, support good policies, criticize bad ones, develop alternative solutions, and promote common values. Mutual support and solidarity play crucial roles in achieving success. This has been the driving force behind ASTRA from the beginning.

While women of Eastern and Central Europe share many problems, their situations do differ substantially from each other. Still the political and economic transformation reins influential, making the situation of women in our region significantly different from women of so called Global North. During the UN Conference on Women in 1995 in Beijing, CEE region was referred to as a "Non-Region", and today it continues to be situated somewhere between the developing and developed countries. Not fitting perfectly well to the Global North or South framework resulted in the marginalization of our issues in international forums.

Currently, this is visible in the ICPD Beyond 2014 Review process. Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries failed to use ICPD as a framework to build a sustainable architecture to protect and promote women's rights. The social and economic upheaval that took place in the CEE region in the 1990s has brought declining socio-economic conditions and increasing inequity throughout the region, and in all CEE countries there is a huge gender gap in the economic activity rate. Decision-making and political power is firmly held by men and not one of the seven countries surveyed for this report is even

close to reaching the 30% quota of women's political participation. This reflects the prevalence of deep-seated gender stereotypes that define women primarily as mothers and wives, assigning their role to the private sphere. Countries of the region are suffering a resurgence of patriarchal discourses and religious fundamentalisms which is reflected in setbacks with population and reproductive rights policies.

At the same time, we note that the process of the Enlargement of the European Union which led to the accession of a number of countries of Central and Eastern Europe to the EU has not resulted in visible improvement of the position of women in the New Member States. Furthermore, the growingly conservative composition of the European Parliament and the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty further limit our advocacy opportunities within the European institutions. Nevertheless, ASTRA Network is determined to use existing tools and contribute to the development of new ones which, hopefully, will lead to EU institutions taking greater responsibility for strengthening policies and addressing gender-related inequalities. On the other hand, growing religious fundamentalisms and nationalistic trends emerging in our region constitute serious barriers which impede progress.

ASTRA members are uniquely and strategically positioned for the work we are doing. We are very active at the national level, gaining more and more recognition and credibility for our efforts in the consistent struggle for women's rights. Many of us have become public figures for women's causes in our home countries. Our organizations are deeply rooted in national contexts, undertaking diverse women's issues in public arenas while also running concrete projects which help women on the ground. We know what we are talking about when we speak about sexual and reproductive rights constrains and diverse forms of discrimination.

Most ASTRA members have also been involved in international debates on women's issues for quite some time, starting the UN path towards gender equality from Vienna Conference for Human Rights in 1993, and currently we are engaged in the ICPD+20 review process.

Increasingly ASTRA has become more active at the EU forums. The principle of "think globally, act locally" is ASTRA's natural way of working.

13 years from ASTRA's inception, thanks to our events and conferences, our monthly bulletin, numerous publications, position papers and other forms of regular advocacy, our Network has been recognized by many international institutions such as the European Parliament, the European Commission, many UN bodies and agencies, and other civil society partners.

One of the most visible recognitions of our efforts was a leadership award received from the Sigrid Rausing Trust on the occasion of 10th Anniversary of the Trust.

## HERSTORY

In December 1999, delegates from 10 countries in Central and Eastern Europe met in Warsaw, Poland to discuss the idea of establishing a regional network focusing on sexual and reproductive health and rights in the region. The meeting was organized by the Federation for Women and Family Planning, a Polish NGO working on sexual and reproductive rights and health issues. NGOs who participated in the founding meeting were active at the UN, especially during the groundbreaking UN conferences of the 1990s on women, human rights, health, and population issues. Out of that meeting the ASTRA Network was born. The idea to start a regional network came from experiences at UN where women from CEE countries felt that their issues were not sufficiently recognized nor addressed. The Network was initially aimed at mobilizing to develop a regional strategy and organizing advocates and activists around common goals. Each meeting participant presented a brief report on selected aspects of women's health in her country. The reports highlighted the common issues faced in each country.

The concerns addressed can be distilled down into the following areas of concern, painting a landscape for the work of this new network:

- Sexual and reproductive health is far from a priority area for most governments; for many, it does not even reach the agenda.
- Gender equality and equity are not sufficiently part of the political agenda; society only beginning to consider the issue, if at all.
- Many laws and policies (on paper or in practice) remain are discriminatory towards women.
- Relative to world standards, birth-rates are low.
- Use of modern contraception remains low due to many barriers to the access of modern contraceptives methods, especially hormonal, such as price and little knowledge.
- Abortion is still widely used as a means of fertility regulation in some countries, while access is being increasingly questioned in some countries, severely restricted in others.
- There has been an explosive growth in STIs and HIV/AIDS since 1990.
- Political transitions have required substantial transformation of health care systems, and the resulting privatization has had negative impacts on access to health care for women struggling to survive in the new economies.
- Access to health care is particularly problematic in rural areas.
- Overall treatment of female patients and "quality of care" are poor in most hospitals and clinics; there is very little respect for patients or concepts of patient rights.
- Violence against women still remains largely a public problem.

- Adolescents face a variety of barriers to sexual and reproductive health education, information and services.
- Forced prostitution and trafficking have become serious problems.

Participants noted the importance of civil society in raising awareness, both in the public and political spheres. A regional network of non-governmental organizations could emphasize capacity-building, advocacy, information exchange and the need to link the women's rights and reproductive rights movements. The group decided to name the regional network ASTRA - Central and Eastern European Women's Network for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights.

ASTRA as a regional network has been dedicated to advocate, raise awareness, and educate governments and the public on SRHR- related issues. This pioneering meeting in Warsaw served as the first strategic planning mechanism for ASTRA, and the newly born network members resolved to begin efforts in the above-mentioned areas through publications, workshops and trainings, monitoring and reporting as well as advocacy and media events. These thematic areas of work continue to thrive for ASTRA today, 13 years after the funding meeting.

Subsequent strategy sessions have taken place over the years, and membership has grown from the original 10 to 28 organizations as of 2012.

The first official strategic plan was adopted at the 3rd ASTRA meeting in Sofia, Bulgaria, in 2003. At that time, the primary goals of the network were to advance reproductive rights, strengthen the collective regional voice, and to expand the network while increasing cohesiveness. Fundraising and partnership building have also emerged over the years as key areas of strategic activity, especially within the EU. Also in 2003, ASTRA members established an Advisory Board of both internal and external members to share expertise and provide support and guidance to the network. The board met personally in 2003, 2004, and 2007. We also hold telephone/skype meetings on a regular basis to liaise with the Advisory Board Members regarding new projects and initiatives.

In July 2007, ASTRA hosted a four day conference in Warsaw, consisting of a two day Advisory Board meeting, a one day conference open to advocates and activists, and a one day meeting of ASTRA members. The overall goal was to explore cutting edge issues and challenges and ASTRA's role in strategic advocacy and awareness raising in the current political, social, and economic climates.

In 2008, ASTRA Network secretariat decided to explore advocacy opportunities with the Council of Europe institutions. The training on how to

work with the Council of Europe was held in Zagreb, Croatia in 2009. also in 2009, thanks to grant from Ford Foundation, we started realization of the project designed to empower women living with HIV/AIDS in the CEE region. After two working meetings in Lviv and Warsaw, group of 10 delegates from ASTRA Network met in International AIDS Conference in Vienna (2010) during panel session on role of gender stereotypes in fighting HIV/AIDS in the CEE region. We hope to further work with HIV/AIDS issues as it remains one of the most burning problems facing women in our region. Yet another important burning issue is growing influence of religious fundamentalisms and political conservatisms resulting in attempts to restrict access to abortion in CEE countries. To address this issue, we started the project on anti-choice opposition in 2011. The first meeting was organized in 2011 in Warsaw and the follow up meeting took place in November 2012.

Abortion was also main topic of panel session organized by ASTRA at the 2012's AWID Forum.

Another important surface of ASTRA Network activities is participation in the ICPD Beyond 2014 review process. Together with organizations from the Global south, ASTRA Network participates in preparation of the Global South report on Status of SRHR in the Global South, and now is actively engaged in planning civil society's input to designing the post 2015 agenda related to SRHR.

As the strategic plan adopted in Sofia in 2003 is drawing to a close, ASTRA is to develop a new five year strategic plan for 2007 through 2012.

In October 2012 we met to discuss a new five year strategic plan 2012-2017, that builds on the outcomes of the strategy planning member consultation.

## CONTEXT

ASTRA sits at the intersection of two critical issues: sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and the uniquely challenging political, economic, and social situation in Central and Eastern Europe. In the last twenty years most countries in this region have been affected by political and economic transitions from communist systems to neo-liberal capitalist economies, ethnic conflicts, revival of nationalisms, and growing religious fundamentalisms. Our region experienced the resurgence of conservatism with traditional visions of societies, families and gender roles. All of these disturbing trends that increase the feeling of insecurity combine to produce a hostile environment for and towards sexual and reproductive rights alongside gender inequities and inequalities.

Further, Central and Eastern Europe does not attract much international attention, leaving many of the issues unheard and overlooked. As economies move forward and more countries accede to the European Union, it is absolutely critical that sexual and reproductive health and rights are respected, promoted, and advanced.

### Status of sexual and reproductive rights

The current status of reproductive health across the region varies widely, though the aforementioned adverse factors tend to be more uniform across borders. In many countries, access to information, education, and services is so limited that many women use abortion as a method of family planning. Yet in other countries, the influence of religion and tradition is slowly but surely chipping away at women's rights, putting legal restrictions on abortion or make it inaccessible even liberal abortion laws exist. Due largely to the lack of education and availability (including price) the use of modern contraception is low. Comprehensive sexuality education and services for adolescents are substantially restricted, and the region has some of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy, teenage abortion, and STIs (including HIV) in young people. Youth participation is met with significant opposition, creating many difficulties in fulfilling the rights of young people in the region. Harmful gender stereotypes remain a significant obstacle to great degree. Within these broad barriers, specific issues are constantly emerging and growing as well.

Crumbling health care systems as a result of political transitions led to both privatization and increases in costs, two insurmountable barriers in access for a majority of women. The gap between the rich and the poor is growing, just as between Western Europe and Eastern Europe.

### Women's movements in CEE

Civil society organizations including women's movements are still very new in this region as organizing was not tolerated until the collapse of communism. Among small number of women's organizations, very few take reproductive and sexual rights on their agenda.

Women's groups still need to be strengthened to adjust to the political and economic climate that is ever changing. They are mostly non-sustainable, lacking skills, knowledge, experience and resources as funding for the Central and Eastern Europe is scarce. Those who hoped that the accession to the European Union will increase access of NGOs to the European funds experienced disappointment as it did not happen for a variety of reasons. Moreover, international donors are gradually closing their operations in the region. We experience devastating decline in funding for women's organizations in the region, that influences our organizations' activities and plans.

Engaging at the national, regional, and international levels with a collective voice provides opportunities for change. Engaging with civil society, the media, and local communities will send a message to political leaders that sexual and reproductive health are fundamental human rights, and restricting access in any way is a violation of those rights.

As a network of NGOs from the region, ASTRA is uniquely positioned to strive for these goals with an acute understanding of the Central and Eastern Europe political, economic, and social context.

## VISION

We aspire to live in the world of justice and equality where women can realize their full potential and enjoy their human rights, especially their sexual and reproductive rights.

## Values

- We support and promote the right to free and informed choice on and access to abortion and a full range of modern contraceptives.
- We support and promote full access to information, education and services on sexual and reproductive rights for young people.
- We support and promote all sexual and reproductive rights as fundamental human right for all women.
- We support and promote gender equality in all aspects of life.

## MISSION

ASTRA mission is to advance sexual and reproductive health and rights as fundamental human rights and strengthen their observance and implementation on the national, regional and international level.

We are determined to ensure that the specific realities and truths about women's sexual and reproductive rights and health in Central and Eastern Europe receive the highest attention and are treated with adequate priority on international, regional and national agendas.

## OBJECTIVES

- To advocate for sexual and reproductive health and rights as equality and human rights issues in the context of international and regional agreements.
- To monitor and report on the status of implementation of sexual and reproductive health and rights and gender-related policies.
- To promote the best legal, policy and service provision standards in sexual and reproductive health and rights.
- To build partnerships with NGOs and relevant institutions including UN agencies and EU bodies.

### Overarching strategies

- To utilize the ASTRA network of NGOs and individuals to advocate in a collective voice for women's sexual and reproductive health and rights in Central and Eastern Europe.
- To engage in advocacy, media, training, and awareness raising activities to achieve meaningful realization of sexual and reproductive health and rights.

As a vital aspect of women's empowerment and gender equality, to support women's right to free and informed choice on and access to: abortion, full range of modern contraceptives, information, education and services on sexual and reproductive health and rights, giving special attention to youth and other underserved groups through the strength and expertise of ASTRA membership and advisory board.

This strategic plan outlines specific and current goals, objectives, and activities through which ASTRA strives to attain its vision and work towards its mission. While the vision, values, and mission are expected to remain somewhat constant, the specific goals and objectives will transform over time. What is important to underline - ASTRA strategies need to be flexible and responsive to current situation which is constantly changing.

Our strategies include public education about sexual and reproductive issues (especially best international medical and human rights standards) to which women and young people should have access. Advocacy for the improvement of national policies regarding sexual and reproductive health and rights, including government obligations and international commitments, constitutes an important component of our strategies. Governments,

international institutions, and societies need to be publicly informed about the status of women's rights in our region, including discriminatory laws and policies. Therefore, monitoring, reporting and informing key players and societies through existing information channels and mainstream media are crucial to our strategic plan. In order to play an important role in the international arena, ASTRA Network needs to increase visibility and credibility as an important and serious civil society actor with strong legitimacy at the national level. Building strategic partnerships with key institutions and NGOs will strengthen our position in the international scene. Finally, in order to increase our effectiveness ASTRA members should be supported by capacity building workshops and trainings which enable them to operate efficiently at the national and international levels. Particularly, investment in the new generation of activists (in our ASTRA Youth network) will contribute to the pool of young people committed to SRHR and guarantee continuity and programmatic sustainability of our work in the future.

GOAL 1: Promote, protect and advance women's sexual and reproductive health and rights in Central and Eastern Europe

#### Objective 1.1

Advocate for the implementation of the internationally accepted sexual and reproductive health and rights standards (incl. Cairo and Beijing agreements (United Nations) as well as European Union policies) at international, regional and national levels.

In order to implement this objective ASTRA will:

1.1.1. Advocate for sexual and reproductive health and rights agreements in the context of relevant international events (and, where possible, contribute to these events).

1.1.2. Organize ASTRA events, such as public hearings, in public forums such as European Parliament and Council of Europe

1.1.3. Promote ICPD+20. Status of SRHR in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Hungary, Poland, Ukraine and Russian Federation report throughout the ICPD Beyond 2014 review process

#### Objective 1.2

Engage with key international bodies in promoting and implementing sexual and reproductive health and rights standards in Central and Eastern Europe.

In order to implement this objective ASTRA will:

1.2.1. Inform international community about the situation in Central and Eastern Europe (promote ASTRA publications).

1.2.2. Continue to strengthen connections with members of European Parliament (MEPs) and officials of European Commission.

### Objective 1.3

Monitor and address new challenges arising in the promotion of SRHR such as demographic concerns in Europe or growing opposition

In order to implement this objective ASTRA will:

1.3.1. Prepare and promote relevant materials publicizing ASTRA's position.

1.3.2. Address these issues in public forums.

1.3.3. Develop and promote positive solutions to the problems.

### Objective 1.4

Promote SRHR as an equality issue, a human rights issue, and a public health issue.

In order to implement this objective ASTRA will:

1.4.1. Engage with institutions dealing with these issues, such as commissions of the European Parliament, political groups, Regional Gender Institute and the European Commission, and securing SRHR in these policies.

1.4.2. Advocate for strengthening linkages of SRHR with the mandate of given institutions.

1.4.2. Organize meetings with ASTRA and participate in relevant events.

### Objective 1.5

Explore other instruments useful in the promotion of SRHR and strengthening of their observance at the national level such European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) and European Court for Human Rights.

In order to implement this objective ASTRA will:

1.5.1. Promote and campaign at the national level for the ratification of Optional Protocol No. 12 on anti-discrimination to the ECHR as useful tool for EU and non-EU countries of Europe.

1.5.2. Build ASTRA capacity around ECHR and European Court for Human Rights via workshops, study tours, etc.

1.5.3. Submit the petitions to EU Parliament to strengthen SRHR e.g. petition on sexuality education in Europe.

## Objective 1.6

Explore UPR as an useful instrument to promote SRHR on the national level.

In order to implement this objective ASTRA will:

1.5.1. Train ASTRA organizations to use UPR for advancing their SRHR agenda.

1.5.2. Submit the UPR reports on behalf of CSOs and engage actively UPR processes to SRHR nationally and globally.

## Objective 1.7

Take advantage of the growing HIV/AIDS pandemic in the CEE region in order to raise awareness about the role of fighting gender stereotypes in seizing the pandemic and streamline SRHR into mainstream agenda.

In order to implement this objective ASTRA will:

1.7.1. Train ASTRA organizations to work on HIV/AIDS issues.

1.7.2. Prepare and promote reports on situation of women living with HIV/AIDS in our region.

## Objective 1.8

Advocate with relevant institutions for the allocation of funds for NGOs in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights in Central and Eastern Europe.

In order to implement this objective ASTRA will:

1.8.1. Raise with donors the issue of under-funding of CEE women's NGOs.

1.8.2. Workshops on how to secure funding and trainings on funding trends.

GOAL 2. Strengthen ASTRA role as the regional voice on sexual and reproductive health and rights issues at the international, regional and national levels, focusing on the UN, the EU, and the Council of Europe

## Objective 2.1

Increase and sustain ASTRA visibility and presence on international and regional level.

In order to implement this objective ASTRA will:

2.1.1. Promote ASTRA publications by organizing ASTRA events in the EU and at national levels.

2.1.2. Issue regular statements, position papers, and advocacy materials on different dimensions of SRHR.

2.1.3. Facilitate calls for action and letter writing campaigns to address emergency situations in CEE countries (e.g. legal initiatives aimed at limiting SRR).

## Objective 2.2

Use European Union membership of ASTRA individual members to advance sexual and reproductive health and rights throughout the region.

In order to implement this objective ASTRA will:

2.2.1. Address SRHR issues in non-member states in all ASTRA publications, position statements and advocacy endeavors.

2.2.2. Conduct/attend workshops for effective advocacy and other capacity-building issues inside the European Union.

## Objective 2.3

Develop partnerships with other NGOs working on gender issues, health, and human rights, esp. those involved in regional training initiatives, and mainstream ASTRA expertise in sexual and reproductive health and rights.

In order to implement this objective ASTRA will:

2.3.1. Explore strategically possibilities of participating in relevant regional initiatives;

2.3.2. Skills and materials inventory of ASTRA members and friends.

GOAL 3. Unify and expand ASTRA as a regional network of advocates on sexual and reproductive health and rights

## Objective 3.1

Strengthen ASTRA capacity to promote sexual and reproductive health and rights, particularly its advocacy skills.

In order to implement this objective ASTRA will organize:

3.1.1. Capacity building workshops and trainings.

3.1.2. Regular contacts and information exchange.

3.1.3. Create and maintain databases of useful materials and contacts for ASTRA members.

#### Objective 3.2

Continue membership development, i.e. expanding network in the region including ASTRA Youth.

In order to implement this objective ASTRA will:

3.2.1. Continue strengthening decision making process of the Network.

3.2.2. ASTRA member meetings at least every other year.

#### Objective 3.3.

Continue facilitating ASTRA Youth Network.

In order to implement this objective ASTRA will:

3.3.1. Strengthen skills and networking of ASTRA youth members, volunteers and supporters (workshops, trainings, etc).

3.3.2. Support ASTRA Youth campaigns, including hearings in the European Parliament on adolescent health needs and expectations.

3.3.3. Include ASTRA Youth in ASTRA activities, trainings, meetings.

#### Objective 3.4

Maintain ASTRA integrity irrespective of European Union membership status of its individual members.

In order to implement this objective ASTRA will:

3.4.1. Support participation of ASTRA members from non-EU countries.

3.4.2. Support ASTRA activities in non-EU countries.

#### Objective 3.5

Whenever needed and possible, provide experience and expertise for ASTRA members' activities related to sexual and reproductive health and rights on national level.

In order to implement this objective ASTRA will:

- 3.5.1. Use e-mail list to request support and ask for expertise.
- 3.5.2. Use ASTRA bulletin as a source of relevant information (inter alia on fundraising possibilities) and experience sharing.
- 3.5.3. Form partnerships on same national issues (fundraising).
- 3.5.4. Utilize ASTRA Secretariat for technical support.

GOAL 4. Raise awareness and knowledge about diverse dimensions of SRHR and increase access to modern reproductive health supplies

#### Objective 4.1

Educate the society, esp. women and youth, members of vulnerable populations, including Roma and people living with HIV, and policy makers about safe and modern RH technologies.

In order to implement this objective ASTRA will:

- 4.1.1. Educate about family planning and sexuality education as means to prevent health problems associated with sexuality and reproduction, such as unsafe abortion and STIs incl. HIV.
- 4.1.2. Promote condom use and sexuality education as HIV prevention.
- 4.1.3. Promote medical abortion as safe and women's controlled method.
- 4.1.4. Promote contraception, including emergency contraception to reduce need for abortion.
- 4.1.5. Support ASTRA Youth in their advocacy initiatives, street events and activities to educate young people.

#### Objective 4.2

Increase access to modern RH supplies.

In order to implement this objective ASTRA will:

- 4.2.1. Advocate with policy makers to increase access e.g. by registration of RH technologies and support financially access to all esp. to underserved groups such as poor, marginalized, youth.
- 4.2.2. Engage with medical community to improve access and quality of care.

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