

The position paper on SRHR from Wanda Nowicka of ASTRA - Central and Eastern European Women's Network for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights.

According to ASTRA – Central and Eastern European Women's Network for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights - status of SRHR in Europe is far from being satisfactory.

Despite the European Union (EU) enlargement there is a significant and growing difference between the status of women's sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) in both: new member states of the EU , as well as 'old' member states. The reproductive health in new member states is similar to the situation in other countries of the Central and East Europe (CEE). For instance, in many countries of the CEE region due to limited contraceptive options, abortion is used as the primary method of fertility control. Many women are still denied the access to modern contraceptives methods due to financial inaccessibility, lack of information or because they receive misleading information. Accurate sexuality education as well as access to reproductive health services is also limited as a result of growing influence of conservative forces, including the Catholic Church. Moreover, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV/AIDS rates have dramatically risen in some of the countries of the region. Experts predict that this crisis is likely to spread to other CEE countries if no effective prevention programs are implemented. This stands in marked contrast to the situation in majority of the 'old' EU member-states, where there are significantly lower HIV/AIDS, teen pregnancy and abortion rates. This is a result of accessible sexual and reproductive health services and information, including subsidized contraceptives, accurate and unbiased sexuality education in schools, and information and services aimed at preventing transmission of STIs.

The growing inequality between east and west in Europe in the area of sexual and reproductive health and rights must be addressed by the EU the same way that gender discrimination in employment is addressed: with comprehensive programmes, policies and laws. Access to sexual and reproductive health care services and information are critical to ensuring women's equality in all aspects of life. EU laws and policies must protect and advance women's sexual and reproductive rights including securing women's access to basic health services, such as contraception, abortion, education and safe pregnancy. They also must respect women's ability to exercise their reproductive choices without coercion, discrimination or violence.

It is critical to keep in mind that new EU member states and non-EU member states from the CEE region have similar SRHR concerns. Due to these similarities it is important that the SRHR issues of non-EU countries from the CEE region are carefully addressed in the EU development and other cooperation policies. In addition, many of the SRHR are cross-border issues, thus, not only must the EU address SRHR concerns within its borders, but it also must focus on the neighboring non-EU countries. Further, EU must ensure that the EU development policies continue working toward promoting and guaranteeing sexual and reproductive health and rights in non-EU countries.

Wanda Nowicka

ASTRA Network