Reviewing the progress in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) during the last 15 years it is evident that overall the eastern Europe and central Asian (EECA) Region made significant progress. However, the inequalities among and within the countries are evident: the maternal mortality ratios vary from 4 to 71 per 100,000 maternities across the Region (see Figure 1); there are high abortion rates; high unmet need for contraceptives (see Figure 2); high rates of adolescent pregnancies (see Figure 3); high rates of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV; and high rates of cervical cancer.

Furthermore, access to quality SRH services and particularly, to effective contraception, varies considerably between different countries. Inequitable access to SRH services has slowed down the progress in health-related outcomes and has a huge economic societal impact. Universal access to SRH still remains a challenge that needs to be addressed by EECA countries and requires the development and implementation of effective regional and national strategies to mobilize and harmonize the efforts and accelerates the progress in delivering the post-2015 sustainable development agenda.

Regional policies, strategies and standards are important tools to guide countries to achieve internationally agreed targets by linking and channeling the evidence, experience and best expertise of technical agencies and professional associations to countries facing these challenges.

In this respect, development of the new European Action Plan for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights supported by strategic frameworks aimed at improvement of women’s health in the European Region are critical steps, being led by WHO in cooperation with UNFPA, EBCOG, the professional associations and experts from European countries. This new European Action Plan will reflect new challenges, realities and solutions in the Region and will mobilize Member States and development partners to join and synchronize their efforts to reduce inequalities in universal access to SRH in each country and the entire Region.

The quality of SRH services is an essential element determining the progress in achieving universal access to SRH; the standards of SRH care are critical to advance the quality of SRH care, to reduce inequalities and to improve the health outcomes at the national and regional levels. In 2015 the EBCOG and UNFPA EECARO joined their efforts to support countries’ efforts in advancing the policies, improving the SRH standards and strengthening institutional capacities aimed at universal access to SRH.

In 2014 EBCOG launched its Standards of Care for Women’s Health at the European Parliament in Brussels. These standards are trailblazers as they are the first such European standards ever produced. Their aim is to promote, improve and harmonize the quality of care and access to care for all women and their babies, not only in the 28 European Union countries, but globally as well.

The European standards are comprised of two sets of documents: one for Obstetric and Neonatal Services and one for Gynaecology Services including SRH. Together, they define a roadmap for the provision of quality services underpinned by clinical governance, safety and patient experience and expectation. They also address requirements for the training and support of doctors and healthcare professionals.

The EBCOG and the UNFPA are working closely together to define strategies for the implementation of the standards in the areas of SRH, particularly, in the areas of concern, where mortality and morbidity, caused by SRH conditions and diseases are preventable. European countries have demonstrated significant progress in reducing maternal mortality and adolescent pregnancy, addressing the unmet need for modern contraceptives and decreasing the numbers of new cases and deaths.
caused by cervical cancer. The EBCOG supports the Regional strategic vision and key strategies of EECARO to make a positive impact in the quality of care in the Region through the introduction of internationally agreed SRH standards, institutional capacity building and knowledge sharing. The UNFPA is supporting and facilitating the Russian translation of all standards related to SRH, which will be an invaluable measure to make these standards available to clinicians in the countries of eastern Europe and central Asia. The Russian Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists is kindly translating the gynaecology standards into Russian to ensure that we can provide the policy makers and professionals of EECARO countries with a complete set of modern standards in the field of SRH. These three sets of standards will be launched at the beginning of 2016.

Together, the UNFPA and the EBCOG are keen to encourage and support young experts and policy makers to visit western Europe and see how high quality SRH services are developed and delivered. We set up an ambitious plan in 2015 to support an Annual Scholarship Award, open to young health professionals who are resident and working in eastern European (excluding those of the European Union) and central Asian Countries (EECA-Region) in the field of sexual and SRH. This scholarship is designed to enable the successful applicants to visit to specialized centres offering knowledge and skills in quality improvement in SRH. We are pleased to announce that the first successful recipient of this prestigious award will spend two weeks at the Chalmers Centre of Reproductive Health, Edinburgh to learn how high quality SRH services are being delivered in Scotland. Lessons learnt from this attachment will help young experts to foster links with policy experts in Edinburgh to develop national policies aimed at the improvement of the Quality of Care in SRH.

Both organizations are expanding the collaboration in institutional capacity building, knowledge sharing and the transfer of know-how to EECA countries. The EBCOG would be happy to support and promote SRH at both regional and national levels by supporting the UNFPA’s efforts in institutional capacity building of professional associations in EECA countries, providing support of leading European experts to UNFPA meetings and conferences aimed at technical expertise sharing and professional networking. There exists an excellent tradition of joint EBCOG/UNFPA sessions, that started in 2014, with the EBCOG hosted session at the Glasgow 23rd European Congress of Obstetrics and Gynaecology that created a unique forum to bridge the science and policies to advance the SRH in the region. The upcoming 2016 joint session will be a new opportunity to unite the experts from European Union and EECA to discuss the achievements, challenges and plans for future cooperation. The next step in our collaboration is the development of an interactive Masters Class on SRH. The course will be delivered by the EBCOG’s experts to strengthen institutional capacities and to ensure universal access to SRH for all in the EECA Region.

We sincerely hope that the development of the new European Action Plan for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights will enhance our efforts by mobilizing Member States to synergize efforts and share learnings and experiences in improving the SRH and rights of citizens everywhere. Such joint measures will have a huge and positive effect on the quality of women’s SRH and care. We trust that the UNFPA/EBCOG collaboration will support the achievement of the new European Action Plan for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights objectives, adding to the wider momentum of the implementation of the standards of care and to the increased quality of healthcare provision for women and their babies in EECA countries.

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