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Practices of promoting gender equality
using the Beijing Platform for Action and the MDGs processes
and building partnership between government, private sector and
civil society
in the Komi Republic of the Russian Federation

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations

I. Women's Chamber experience on the BPA and the MDGs implementation.

Women's Chamber is a non-governmental organization working for achievement of gender equality using MDGs and BPA processes. The NGO, taking into account existing international experience and regional peculiarities of the Komi Republic (KR), has developed several strategies aimed at promoting gender equality in the KR, which are actively utilized by other public and governmental organizations, i.e.:

- 1.1 Creating monitoring of women's status in the Komi Republic under the project "Monitoring and women's rights advocacy".
- 1.2 Conducting Gender Awareness and Education campaigns in the provinces of the Komi Republic.
- 1.3 Promoting women's participation in decision-making processes under the project "From governance balance towards life harmony".
- 1.4 Organizing Public Information Campaign "A Life free of Violence – It is Our Right" in the Komi Republic.
- 1.5 Conducting public parliamentary hearings and discussions on critical issues related to women's human rights in Komi Republic.

Women's Chamber has contributed a lot and continues its work towards addressing social problems of the republic through the development and realization of a number of innovative projects. This work has been constantly supported by the UNDP in Russia and UNIFEM.

1.1. Monitoring and women's rights advocacy.

Since 1993, Women's Chamber has been actively involved in women's rights advocacy. Addressing critical women's concerns is of a high importance, however, in order to increase effectiveness of these efforts there is a clear need for in-depth analysis and research of the roots of women's rights violations and types existing problems. Moreover, women themselves should be aware of their rights and existing legislation protecting these rights. This has led to the necessity of conducting monitoring.

The data collection process on women's status in the Komi Republic that started under the project "Monitoring and women's rights advocacy" has been further continued. In 2001, two monitorings were conducted:

- Monitoring on violence against women, and
- Monitoring on women's rights compliance.

The monitorings' results have served as a basis for the Women Status Report that was further discussed by the State Council of the Komi Republic during the roundtable organized in cooperation with the Committee on Social Policy.

The consecutive Report on "Gender dimension of human rights" was based on the results of five following monitorings conducted in 2002-2003:

- "Men and women: Employers' preferences",
- "Urban and rural poverty: gender dimensions",
- "Gender dimensions of political participation and political processes in the KR",
- "Gender dimensions of health rights of citizens of the KR",
- "Gender violence".

The report has been evaluated by the experts, and on June 10, 2003 it was publicly discussed in Syktyvkar at the KR State Council meeting, attended by more than 100 participants - representatives of government, parliament, academia, NGOs and mass media.

Currently, the work of women's rights advocates in the provinces of the republic is continuing. On December 10, 2003, on International Day of Human Rights, 7 members of Women's Chamber received certificates of the Representatives of Human Rights Commissioner of the KR. In this way, the Commissioner's Office has enlisted the support of the women's organizations, and they, in turn, have gained additional incentives for further work towards protection of human rights.

1.2. Raising gender awareness and gender education.

The monitoring results proved that information and knowledge sharing about women's rights protection is of high demand in the republic. However, taking into account local peculiarities, such as lack of necessary information channels and territory size, a special approach had to be developed. As a result the team of tutors on gender awareness has been set up. This project has received funding from the Canadian Fund for Support of Russia's Women and has been implemented in the Komi Republic for two years (2001-2002).

Among the main goals of the project were to mainstream gender into activities of the local women's NGOs and municipal governmental organizations of the republic and to raise level of public gender awareness. As a result, the project team has developed a program of gender educational seminars using participatory approach.

The project team made an attempt to visualize the real status of women in the cities and regions of the republic. This exercise resulted in the creation of Gender Indicators Map called "Gender Traffic Light". This map became ponderable, capacious and a visual advocacy tool aimed at raising the awareness about necessity to put efforts towards improving status of women.

The most important outcome of the project were several follow-up initiatives of women-activists who attended the seminars. Thus, women of Letka village have organized a series of lectures on elimination of violence against women in neighboring villages. In Mordino village, a committee,

consisting of three women, visited vulnerable families. In Sosnogorsk and Nizhnii Odess the project “Mom, dad, you have me!”, which addressed the problem of social orphanhood, has been launched and successfully implemented.

1.3. Promoting women’s participation in decision-making processes.

In the Komi Republic women’s representation at the decision-making level estimates 33% in the local government and 13.7% in the State Council of the RK, which does not correspond with the total share of women in the republic (54%) and implies lack of real equality of men and women in social, economic and political spheres.

In order to develop leadership skills and increase professional competence of the women, the School of Women’s Leadership (SWL) was established in 2000. During a year and a half a number of women’s rights advocates of the republic have been receiving additional professional education on “NGO Management”. School attendees’ testimonials, among which were deputies of the state councils, and polls revealed the necessity of developing new forms and methods of supporting women’s participation in political life and more active and effective promotion of gender equality. This led to the creation of the project “From balance in governance towards life harmony”.

As a part of the project the School “Partners” was established for women and candidates at regional and municipal levels; the school aimed to increase the capacity of the women during the election campaigns. This school has been attended by 29 women of the Republic, who decided to take part in the up-coming elections. To raise public gender equality awareness in the Komi Republic, the Syktyvkar Discussion Club has been opened in co-operation with the Political Club of the State Syktyvkar University (SSU). The Discussion Club plenaries have been devoted to various social aspects of women and men’s participation in the political life.

One of the tangible results of the project was the fact that 8 alumni of the School “Partners” and 2 alumni of the School of Women’s Leadership received deputy mandates at the republican elections in March 2003, and many other women’s rights advocates, who attended these programs, have been actively involved in the election campaigns of other candidates.

1.4. Public Information Campaign “A Life free of Violence – It is Our Right”.

Women’s Chamber was one of the first non-governmental organizations in the Komi Republic, which raised the issues of domestic violence and violence against women. In 2001 a number of non-governmental organizations have joined a regional public awareness campaign in order to raise awareness among general public on violence against women. In the frameworks of the campaign, various non-governmental organizations, educational establishments, Ministry of Social Issues of KR, Ministry of Health of KR and Ministry of Internal Affairs have combined their efforts towards elimination of gender-based violence.

The campaign included several public events aimed at raising public awareness about gender-based violence. This included:

- public court on domestic violence with participation of the students of the SSU Legal Studies department,
- youth talk-show “A Life free of Violence – It is Our Right?” organized with the support from the SSU Agency of Youth Information.

During the past 4 years Women’s Chamber joined the global campaign “16 days of activism against gender-based violence”, which is held annually on November 25 – December 10. The campaign includes conducting a series of lectures in the universities, public demonstrations in the streets, “White scarf” action, distribution of open letter, etc.

Latent character of the gender violence in the republic has resulted in introduction of a series of gender educational programmes. During the campaign more than 400 people have attended various seminars, field trainings, etc. Among the participants were social services specialists, different levels decision-makers, representatives of the civil society and law enforcement agencies, women activists and advocates and students.

In support to the raising awareness campaign and educational component, a practical support and advice was constantly provided. On June 10, 2002 UNDP and Women’s Chamber established the Office of Social Advocates, which offered free services of advocates weekly, who provided consultations on domestic violence issues, rendered legal advice, assisted clients during investigation procedures. Since then, 414 people have applied for support and received necessary assistance from this office.

1.5. Mass media for equal rights and equal opportunities for men and women.

Today women of the Komi Republic are actively participating in all spheres of our life, but this is not adequately reflected in the media. To address this situation, 3 years ago Women’s Chamber launched the competition “Mass media for equal rights and equal opportunities for men and women”. Final assessment of the journalists’ work considered the following: level of influence on public opinion, actual reflection of the existing gender problems, social roles of women and men, etc.

Overall, 153 works have been submitted. In general, the competition turned to be a powerful mechanism for building partnership relations with the mass media and as a result, the competition became an annual event.

As the journalists noted, gender equality issues are now reflected more often in the republican media. The pool of journalists writing about this issue have expanded the information on gender equality and it is becoming more popular among the general public; gender sensitivity of the public is gradually increasing, which is demonstrated through the recent social polls and elections result.

1.6. Improvement of legislation.

Women’s Chamber serves as a bridge between women’s non-governmental organizations and governmental agencies.

In 1996 the members of the Women's Chamber drafted and actively participated in the process of adoption of the law on "Additional social guarantees on protection of maternity, paternity and childhood in the Komi Republic", which preserved maximum of the social benefits.

Since 1998, the on-going process of public control and expertise is facilitated around implementation of the "Republican plan of action on improvement of women's status in the KR".

In June 2000, the public parliamentary hearings "Beijing Platform for Action: results, challenges and perspectives at regional level" have been organized with the technical support from the UNDP.

In June 2000, in collaboration with the Civil Parliament of the KR, the public expertise "Social effects of the Concept of state family policy in the Komi Republic", ratified by Resolution of State Council of the Komi Republic on 19.06.1996, has been organized.

In 2002 Women's Chamber proposed several initiatives for State Council of the Komi Republic:

1. To support adoption of the federal law on "State guarantees of equal rights and freedoms and equal opportunities for men and women in the Russian federation", and, in this regard, to introduce changes into electoral legislation of the republic:
 - First, to ensure equal rights and opportunities for women in the process of nominating women-individuals as candidates during elections;
 - Second, to consider gender quotas in the process of making lists of candidates from political parties during elections at republican level.
2. To adopt the law of the KR on "Social orders".
3. To introduce changes into the law of the Komi Republic on "Social partnership".

In 2003, being a member of the Public Chamber of the Komi Republic, Women's Chamber developed recommendations on the following issues: reforms of housing and communal services and health in the republic and government officials accountability.

II. Regional Forum "MDGs – A Platform for Development".

Women's Chamber, well known as an organization leading the women's movement in Komi, with the support from UNIFEM, has initiated the project on 'MDGs – as a Platform for Development in Komi Republic', aiming at fostering partnerships between civil society, regional government and private sector and building tripartite alliances for joining forces for regional development and poverty reduction - the major Goal of the MDGs.

Civil society in Komi Republic represents strong consolidated force, which is open for partnership and dialogue with the regional government. It was an important factor for initiating the regional discussions on the MDGs in Komi Republic and applying the MDGs as a strategic framework for analysis and development of regional priorities and strategies.

Komi Republic is the only region in Russian Federation which has an experience of annual reporting of NGOs on the status of women in the region, each year making analysis of different aspects of gender equality and women issues such as: gender dimensions of human rights, gender aspects of participation in policy making processes, gender and poverty in rural and urban areas in the region, etc, formed the strong analytical base for civil society to lead the MDGs process.

Four Goals on **Poverty Reduction, Gender Equality, Improved Health and Sustainable Environment** were selected as regional development priorities. The MDGs gender indicators elaborated by Kazakhstan UNCT were used as the strategic framework for analysis of the situation, as well as the inspirational basis for identifying additional targets and indicators relevant to the region. The dialogue was pursued by applying two-dimensional approach, such as 1) *engendering all four goals*; and 2) *having the Goal on Gender equality in its own among other three goals*.

The Forum on “MDGs – A Platform for Development in Komi Republic” - the major event within the MDGs process in Komi Republic was held in November 2003. For the first time in the history of Komi Republic 241 representatives from the federal and municipal governments, private sector, civil society and scientists came together to discuss the regional development priorities and elaborate the strategies for implementation of the MDGs. The Forum provided a platform for a dialogue allowing open exchange of opinions and joint elaboration of the recommendations to the government, private sector and civil society.

The discussions in the Forum resulted in the important outcome of the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding between the government, private sector, and NGOs for achievement of MDGs in Komi Republic. The MOU is an essential document that secures long term and strategic partnerships. The signing of the MOU certifies trustful relationships that have been established between the civil society, government and business sector during the MDGs process in Komi Republic. With the purpose of ensuring the implementation of the MOU, the partners elaborated and approved the Action Plan.

Several factors formed the basis for the success of the Forum such as:

- MDGs, having multidimensional and multi-sectoral character and providing clearly stated and interrelated targets and indicators, offer a platform for interaction in finding common areas for partnership between government, civil society and private sector. The MDGs are the glue that brings together different layers of society uniting them under one strategic agenda. The Forum used this factor for highlighting the centrality of gender equality to all aspects of MDGs, and emphasizing that without taking into account the different ways in which women and men cope with problems, and subsequently without

cohesive approach for development, the actors may fail to respond meaningfully to socio-economic problems in the region.

- Serious analytical work undertaken by the group of experts during the preparatory stage to the Forum, provided well structured resource materials with strong argumentations and facts, which allowed participants to hold on constructive discussions and come up with concrete recommendations and strategies. It was commonly emphasized that the set of MDGs target and indicators helped to generate debates and formed the basis for elaborating additional gender responsive and locally relevant targets and indicators;
- Civil society used the package of analytical materials as the advocacy tool to attract attention of the government, private sector and public as a whole to inform on the important development processes ongoing in the region.

Private sector in Russia is consolidated under the Chamber of Commerce – body that provides policy support for development of businesses. Thus, representing the business sector as a whole, the Chamber of Commerce also fulfilled authority of reflecting their consolidated opinion and securing their interests during the MDGs process.

Several follow up actions have been undertaken by the partners immediately after the Forum, including **1)** the project has been initiated and funded by the government of Komi to study the informal sector of economy, and its impact on the status of women, **2)** UNIFEM project on Gender Budgeting in Russia has been piloted in the Komi Republic; **3)** the Law on ‘Civil Society Participation in the Development and Implementation of social-economic programmes and policies in Komi Republic’ has been drafted and due for submission to the Parliament after a series of public discussions; **4)** the project “Strengthening organizational and financial capacities of the NGOs in the Komi Republic” has been worked out and implemented; **5)** the project “Raising social accountability of the business sector in the Komi Republic” is in the process of implementation.

A very important further step for Women’s Chamber in its activities became the innovative project “Gender Budgets in Russia”, which was supported and funded by the UNIFEM. This project aims at addressing several objectives:

1. Developing and implementing a mechanism of gender budgets analysis in the Komi Republic.
2. Conducting gender analysis of the budget policy legislation of the Komi Republic.
3. Creating and facilitating mechanisms of public participation in the budgeting processes.
4. Developing a portfolio of specific amendments for federal and regional budgets on improvement of women and children status.

This project has been launched in the Komi Republic in August 2004. Since then we have achieved the following:

1. A group of experts has been formed and prepared from representatives of the governmental and non-governmental sectors;
2. Mechanisms of gender analysis of the budget for 2005 have been developed and piloted;
3. Questions on establishment of the special structure (Council) on gender analysis of the budget have been settled;
4. Technology and stages of the process of the budget analysis for the next 3 years have been identified;
5. Mechanisms of the public participation in the budgeting processes through drafting the laws have been developed;
6. Memorandum of Understanding on social issues and joint action plan towards inclusion of civil society in the processes of public expertise and control over draft laws, programmes and laws of the Komi Republic have been signed between Public Chamber of the Komi Republic and Deputy Head of the Komi Republic.

III. Main gaps and challenges in implementing the Beijing Platform for Action and the Millennium Development Goals at national level

1. Lack of a national mechanism and strategy for promoting gender equality in the Komi Republic.
2. Lack of state programmes that address specific gender concerns and that are adequately funded.
3. Lack of coordination at the federal level between government and civil society on key gender issues.
4. Declining economic status of women, including:
 - a lack of opportunities for employment in the formal sector of the economy;
 - a reduction in social benefits package;
 - a high level of poverty, in particular among women and families with children;
 - low wages in the public sector.
5. A decline in the participation of women in political decision-making processes. Numerous social and economic reforms do not take into account gender-specific issues.
6. Lack of legislative and administrative mechanisms aimed at strengthening the financial and organizational capacities of civil society.