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Economic literacy from a gender perspective

Thank you for inviting me to the UN ECE Regional Review meeting and giving me the opportunity to present the experiences of two European networks: KARAT and WIDE, on economic literacy.

KARAT is a network of women's organizations and gender equality advocates working to ensure gender equality in the CEE/CIS countries. It has worked for many years on issues of social and economic justice including a popular economics program, and women's human rights.

WIDE is a European network of development NGOs, gender equality advocates and human rights activists. It focuses on economic and development, from a Popular Economics program to feminist work on globalization and particularly gender and trade.

Economic Literacy is one of the initiatives in which KARAT and WIDE have been cooperating on since 2002.

KARAT's interest in economics was sparked by the Beijing+5 meeting. In the debates on critical issues for women affected by the transformation process, KARAT realized the need of women's organizations from the region to learn about economics.

Thus, the Economic Literacy program's objective is to increase women's knowledge on economic concepts and processes relevant to the CEE/CIS region. The program enables its participants, on the basis of their lived experience, to recognize their right to criticize economic and financial policy.

While gendered economic literacy is important globally, it is critical in the CEE/CIS region, where civil society often lacks the basic knowledge and appropriate models for dealing with the social consequences of the neo-liberal economy. Additional confusion is caused by our experience of the state as an ineffective economic actor, both in the previous regime and the current situation.

Within the Economic Literacy Program, KARAT developed training materials and conducted two regional and 5 national trainings in Bulgaria, Serbia, Romania, Poland and Georgia. The trainings were attended by women's NGOs, as well as in some cases politicians, public servants and academics. The trainings were all based on our "Economic Literacy resource kit for CEE/CIS. Gender and Economy. How not to be afraid of economic lobbying and advocacy". The kit was written in user friendly language in English and translated into Russian and Romanian.

What are the main lessons learned from our program implemented in 2004-5?

1. Although the program was developed in cooperation with our members from different countries of CEE and CIS, we noticed that it should be further adopted to the specificity of countries, such as the state of transition from centrally planned to a free market economy, the extent of the informal economy, or access to public social security.

2. Sometimes economic literacy was confused by with training on entrepreneurship. The crucial difference, however, is that entrepreneurship programs tend to prioritize enterprise creation and to underemphasize the state's responsibility for employment policy.
3. We saw a need to assess the impact of 'wild capitalism' on women, especially those with low education and skills. Examples include the exploitation of women and a denial of even basic labour rights.

As follow-up of its Economic Literacy program, KARAT has developed a pilot project focusing women's working conditions in supermarkets in Poland where women are frequently discriminated against and their rights are violated. The pilot project is now continued in other countries in the Region.

The exhibition "Through their eyes", which was presented yesterday here in the UN ECE premises also comes out of Karat's Economic Literacy work. It shows the social and economic problems faced by women in our region, such as poverty, the informal economy, or survival strategies in refugee camps.

The current economic crisis makes the above problems even more pressing, as it presents women from the region with new challenges: how to deal with the gendered consequences of the economic crisis, while even the pre-crisis situation was not sufficiently understood and addressed.

Conclusions. The creation of basic knowledge about the economy from a gender perspective remains timely and urgently needed. This is particularly true for the CIS and some Eastern and Southern European countries, globally most affected by the crisis.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. We see an urgent need to continue our program on economic literacy broadening it to women's NGOs from South Eastern Europe and CIS countries. A deeper understanding of the gendered foundations of capitalist economies is necessary to enable women to engage with political decision making.
2. We experience a need to update and expand our program to better respond to the vital economic and social issues that women face. Women's knowledge on the economic and financial crisis and the responses to it is critical. Developing additional chapters to the kit, for example on stimulus packages, or the effect of the crisis on migration and remittances would be our priority.
3. In order to respond to the pressing needs identified in this presentation, financial support for Economic Literacy from a gender perspective in Europe including CIS countries is necessary. It should become a priority for all actors interested to enable women to not only to develop survival strategies but to meaningfully influence ongoing economic decisionmaking at the national and regional levels.