

Application to call for submissions to OHCHR study on “Traditional values”

Applicant organization: “Women for Development”, LLC (formerly Regional Charity Social organization “Woman’s dignity”)

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The Republic of Chechnya (the North Caucasus province of Russian Federation) represents a good example of a traditional patriarchal society. The customary law (called by the Chechens “*adat*”) is practiced here along with Russian constitution and Sharia law, and appears to be much more influential, especially when touching upon gender issues. *Adat* is the patriarchal code of norms that has been regulating life of the Chechens over centuries. Despite the fact that great majority of these rules and norms do not correspond with modern way of life, in reality all family and household matters (in short, the fate of women) are decided according to the traditions of *adat*. Those in positions of power are all too keen to support this situation. Propaganda in support of these archaic traditions in the local, government-controlled media has led to increasing violations of women’s rights, to women’s suffering and sometimes to tragedy.

The *adat* rules are unwritten, and often quite vague. In the case of a conflict, the male relatives of the parties involved meet to discuss the case. Women never participate in these discussions, even if the case concerns them. They have no say in the decision, either. Women and children are simply subject to the decisions of men.

Adat holds that in case of divorce, Chechen women cannot keep their children. Often they cannot even visit them, or play any part in their upbringing, which contradicts both Russian constitution and Islam. Nor, when the husband dies, can the woman inherit substantial property, such as land, housing, cars or money. At best, if she has a son (who will inherit his late father’s property), the latter will provide her with a roof over her head.

The agenda of the Chechen political leaders for the moral and spiritual edification of the Chechen people begins and ends with the censure of women. From the TV screens and in the local papers, they dictate rules for women: what women should look like and how they should conduct themselves. This extends to outright violence and the violation of women’s basic human rights. The security cadres confiscate cell phones from women, to prevent potential illicit contact with men. They initiated a campaign of paintball shootings against women who were walking in the street without headscarves. They endorse so-called ‘honor killings’ of supposedly immoral women, in order to “set an example”. When the government itself perpetrates and endorses violence against women, it is hardly surprising that this leads to a rise in violence against women in the family as well, at the hands of their husbands.

The NGO community of Chechnya, as well as many progressive people around the world, are greatly concerned of the adoption of the 21/3 resolution by the UN Human Rights Council. It seems that now both Russian and local governments have got an international approval to continue and intensify women’s rights violations in Chechnya.

The Russian federal government ignores the systemic violations of their law. So, women’s organizations like Women for Development play a vital role. They are in a position to be able to help women who have decided to fight for their rights.

Since the date of its establishment in 2002, Women for Development focused its efforts on providing multi-facet assistance for women to develop and strengthen their personal resources and become full-fledged members of the society: legal education and support in the courts, psychosocial support, health care, development of entrepreneurship, driving courses, raising awareness of the key actors from the society on the violations of women's rights and many others.

Among our greatest achievements in the past couple of years we can list the following:

- increase in number of women who want to protect their rights in accordance with Russian constitution: the number of women's claims filed in the official courts has risen, as has the number of cases won by women: of the 28 complains concerning keeping children after divorce, submitted to the organizational lawyer in 2012, 12 were successful, the rest are under consideration. The exemplary one won in December 2012: Aldamova Raisa Umarovna, has three daughters of 12, 10 and 9 years. Her husband took the second wife and wanted to keep children with him after divorce with Raisa. The federal court of Staropromyslovskiy district of Grozny passed judgment that children would stay with mother and made the father to sign a written consent of not hindering their upbringing by their mother;
- through introducing the driving courses, teaching over 200 women to drive and helping them to get their driving licenses, we had fought a stereotype of "driving a car is not a women's business" and launched a tendency in the Chechen society, and nowadays more and more women can be seen driving;
- through numerous awareness raising activities of the organization, among others the Round table discussions with the key stakeholders from the government and public sector, the Chechen society overstepped a "silence barrier" and people started to speak aloud on the harmful consequences of the government introduced archaic traditions that significantly restricted freedoms and rights of women;
- there are cases when government officials dare to make progressive statements on the gender issues that divide with official position of the Chechen authorities. At one of the round table discussions a head of the Public chamber of Chechnya stated there was no way of dealing with women's issues other than a democratic one;
- through lobbying the issue of bride kidnapping on the local and international levels by Women for Development as well as other grass-roots women's NGOs, the head of Chechnya Ramzan Kadyrov issued an order that put an end to this phenomenon;
- similarly, Women for Development influenced the government department on external relations to recommend the head of the republic to prohibit child marriages in Chechnya;
- Women for Development managed to verbalize the taboo topics of women's situation, like suicide and its reasons, child marriages and their negative impacts, humiliation of women as a result of polygamy and others;

These are results that inspire the members of the Women for Development and their numerous female clients. These are examples that give strength to move forward in the risky and unsafe environment towards gender equality and justice in Chechnya and in the North Caucasus as a whole.

Attached to this information we send a short video of the discussions on customs and traditions concerning women we held with the framework of our programs.