Gender and violence in the work practices of women’s crisis centres in Russia

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This paper presents preliminary results of a PhD project on the work practices of women’s crisis centres in Russia. The research setting is ethnographic, and the material has been produced in three public crisis departments and one NGO crisis centre in Central and North-Western Russia in 2004 and 2008-2010. Fieldwork material consists of fieldnotes, interviews with staff members and service users, booklets, annual reports, media materials, and photographs.

For a long time, gender violence against women was a taboo in Russia, and women experiencing violence remained with no protection. In the 1990s, women’s movement brought the issue to public consciousness, and opened first telephone hotlines with foreign funding. During the last decade, many NGO centres have reduced their activities due to lack of funding, but a growing number of crisis units has been opened inside public social services. This study dates back to time, when public crisis departments were becoming the main form of work against violence in families in Russia. The public units have better resources to the work, including shelter places, but their challenges are lack of well-trained personnel and high turnover of it, and low trust of citizens towards public services.

The approaches to the interplay of gender and violence in the everyday work of the centres can be divided to 1) gender-neutral family-centred approach, 2) biology-justified protection of women and 3) gender-sensitive women’s rights approach. Vast majority of all clients are women and children. There is a lot of interest towards work with men, but stereotypes and insufficiencies of the legislation are seen as an obstacle to it. In the actual work with women-survivors, a lot of responsibility on preventing future violence is laid on them.

Keywords: Russia, crisis centres, work practices, gender violence.