Marginalized women: who are they, and how to help them?

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Among homeless people, the most vulnerable are homeless women. For women without a residence permit it is really difficult to get back into society, to change their situation, because most rehabilitation and social adaptation programmes and projects are focused on men.

The reasons why women become homeless are different: huge number of homeless women are victims of domestic violence. Domestic violence may consist not only of beatings and rape, but also limitations to women’s rights, rough treatment, isolation and psychological stress. Women who are ex-prisoners also suffer discrimination.

Our project plan involved the exchange of experience between organisations working directly with marginalised groups of citizen. It was the first time in Togliatti that NGOs, the authorities and other interested people came together to discuss the most effective methods of working with marginalised groups. The exchange helped to outline a range of problems which participants encounter, and pin-point successful practices that NGOs can use in their work. Eight women from the target group were interviewed and included in the cycle of training sessions, familiarisation and teaching visits, to help them understand about capacity building and the role of NGOs.

As a result of the work on capacity building, two initiative groups were formed among the target group. One of them submitted documents for the registration of an NGO which plans to render services to women and their children living in difficult circumstances: psychological, legal, educational etc.

We carried out a six-week awareness-raising campaign and a photo-exhibition at the Festival of Social Cinema. About 100 young people between 15 and 30 were able to study the photos and information materials on the stands. Five higher education institutions were involved in the campaign. Students, teachers, and also employees of the Department for social support of the population were made aware of the information materials generated by the campaign: the brochures “Marginalised groups. Who are they?” and “The situation of marginalised women in Russia”. 100 copies of the brochure with the results of our experience were published and distributed.

The results of questioning after the awareness-raising campaign showed that 72% had not known who the marginalised groups were, and heard the terms “marginal” and “marginalised” for the first time; 49% had little sympathy for people from marginalised groups; 41% considered it impossible for marginalised women to protect their rights.

After the project was over it became clear that the mobilisation of marginalised women through initiative groups and non-profit organisations is a more effective way out of their difficult circumstances than passive help from outside. But before plunging marginalised women into the complexity of NGO activity, it is necessary to prepare them for work in this sector by carrying out training and seminars about different forms and opportunities for self-help, to prepare women psychologically for the programme of mobilisation.

It is not easy, but so important to help every woman feel safe.

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