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Researching Gender Violence and Crisis Centres for Women in Russia

This ongoing PhD study examines the work against gender violence done in crisis centres for women in Russia using rich fieldwork data from four of those centres. The everyday working practices are analysed especially from the viewpoint of problem definitions, gender and agency. The approach of the study is ethnographic. The study is based on the ideas of social constructionism, and it employs the theory of social problems work (Holstein & Miller 2003), according to which the understandings of social problems, working practices and needed solutions are accomplished and maintained in local cultures, in the everyday interaction between the actors within the institutions.

According to a survey conducted in 2002, up to up to 50 per cent of married women in Russia had experienced physical violence from the side of their husbands at least once. Eighteen per cent of women lived in conditions of severe or continuous violence. (Gorshkova & Shurygina 2003.). Although domestic violence against women is a widespread phenomenon in the country, it was constructed as a social problem, requiring the state's and society's intervention, only in the 1990s. The problem entered public discussion through the efforts of independent women's groups in collaboration with Western feminists in the early 1990s (Hemment 2004), and first crisis centres, which had both service providing and advocacy goals, were opened in 1993-1994 (Zabelina 1999, 36). Nowadays there are both NGO and state units. Thus, many NGO units have closed their doors because of the lack of finances, and state-funded crisis departments seem to become the main form of violence work in Russia.

Crisis centres and their work against gender violence are an interesting case for a constructionist social work researcher, as they are working with a "new" social problem and constructing understanding of it in their everyday working practices. They have brought new issues to the agenda of welfare services, connected to bodily issues and sexuality. Additionally, through the case of crisis centres, I examine in this study the interaction between clients and workers in welfare services in today's Russia and how agency is constructed in the encounters. The data of this study has been produced in four crisis centres in Central and South-Western Russia. In this paper I discuss the methodological setting of the study, the recently finished fieldwork period and experiences from the field.

Bibliography:

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