

Constructing gender in women's crisis centres - state and NGO units tackling domestic violence in Russia

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Gendered violence became a publicly discussed topic in Russia in early 1990's, when women's activists raised the question to public debate. The first women's crisis centres, which had both service providing and advocacy goals, were founded in 1993 by independent women's groups and with assistance of foreign donors. In mid 2000's there were estimated to be 200 units working against domestic and/or sexual violence in Russia. There are state/municipal and NGO crisis centres, as well as "public-civic-mix" units. During the 2000's many of the NGO units have been urged to close due to financial problems, but all more state/municipal crisis departments have been opened.

The first NGO centres were a part of transnational women's movement, committed themselves to principles of feminism, and considered domestic violence as a gendered problem. The public units, which have not been studied that much yet, seem to be more reluctant in their attitudes to directly feminist ideas, but promote gender equality. The services are often directed to all family members, not only women or women with children.

This paper discusses the meanings acquired by gender in the everyday work of Russian crisis centres. Are the working practices gender sensitive or gender neutral? With whom and by whom is the work done? What is the role of men in crisis centres? On the basis of the empirical findings the analysis seeks for connections between gender constructions in the crisis centres' everyday work and Russian gender system.

The work is a part of an ongoing PhD study on Social Work. It is based on ethnographic fieldwork in state/municipal and NGO crisis centres in Izhevsk (Udmurt Republic), Sortavala (Republic of Karelia) and Saratov (Southern Volga region) conducted in 2004, 2008 and 2009. The material consists of fieldnotes and interviews as well as information materials and official documents of the centres.