



## Gender Violence and Crisis Centres for Women in Russia

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This ongoing PhD study explores the everyday practices of women's crisis centres in Russia and the constructions of gender violence in these centres. The study is based on rich ethnographic data from four crisis centres in Central and North-Western Russia, and as the theoretic-methodological framework of the study I employ the idea of social problems work (Holstein and Miller 2003) and institutional ethnography by Dorothy E. Smith (2002, 2005). In this paper I briefly introduce the research setting and the current stage of my study.

Domestic violence against women has traditionally been a private issue in Russia. As one social worker in one of the researched crisis centres put it, referring to an infamous statement in a perestroika time TV show about sex being a tabooed issue: "Like we didn't have sex in the Soviet Union, we didn't have domestic violence either". Violence within family certainly existed, but the problem was mainly kept inside the homes. Later on, surveys have brought the prevalence of domestic violence against women<sup>1</sup> to people's consciousness. According to a 2002 survey, up to fifty per cent of married women have experienced physical violence from the side of their husbands at least once, and eighteen per cent of women live in conditions of severe or continuous violence (Gorshkova and Shurygina 2003).

Gendered violence within family was constructed as a social problem requiring state's and society's intervention in Russia only in 1990s. Independent women's groups raised the issue to public discussion (Hemment 2004), and first crisis centres were soon established to help victims of violence and to change attitudes towards the problem in society (Johnson 2009, Zabelina 1999). Today, there are both non-governmental crisis centres and crisis departments of public social service centres working with victims of violence. The number of public units has been rising, but simultaneously many of the NGOs are struggling for their existence because of lack of funding (Johnson 2009, Johnson and Saarinen 2011, Liapunova and Dracheva 2009).

In my ongoing study I analyze the working practices of the crisis centres and the ways in which they construct understanding of gender violence as a social problem in contemporary Russia. I'm interested in the everyday work of the crisis centres, their working practices and logics of social work with clients on the micro level. Especially, I pay attention to how gender, violence as a social problem, and agency of the clients and professionals are constructed in the everyday working practices. Based on this, my research questions are: 1) How is violence as a social problem constructed in the working practices of the crisis centres?

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<sup>1</sup> According to many estimates (e.g. Zabelina et al. 2007, 20) majority of spousal violence in Russia is male violence against women. Violence against women is also the main problem, which the crisis centres of my study work with. Though, with the focus of my study I do not argue that women couldn't also be perpetrators and men victims of domestic violence. Additionally, violence occurs also in same-sex relationships.

2) What kind of meanings does gender acquire in the working practices? 3) How is the agency of clients and specialists constructed in the interaction between them?

I find social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann 1966) an inspiring approach for my study, because – as stated above – gender violence is a “new” social problem in Russia, and the understanding of it is actively developed, transmitted and maintained in the social reality and interactions. Crisis centres, in which I locate my study, are important agents in this construction process. When analysing the work of the crisis centres from a constructionist perspective, I employ the theory of social problems work (Holstein and Miller 2003). Based on the ideas of social constructionism, social problems work is about constructing common understanding about the problems, client relations and needed changes in a particular social work institution. These institutions are referred to as “local cultures”, and the analysis focuses on the interpretative practices, through which the understandings are produced.

As a wide methodological framework of my study I use ethnography, which I understand both as a way of producing data, analysing it and writing about it. As in institutional ethnography (Smith 2002, 2005), my starting point has been in people’s everyday lives and in the notion that our knowing is constructed in social interaction. According to Smith (2005) everyday practices should in the analysis be linked to wider societal structures, to what happens “elsewhere and elsewhere”. Macro level structures and interconnections with different happenings are here understood as “ruling relations”, which coordinate people’s doings in the local setting.

In practice, doing ethnography has in my study meant participating in the everyday life of the crisis centres, being interested in the micro level procedures, and learning to understand, how people involved in the work of crisis centres make sense of their lives and doings. I have conducted extensive fieldwork in four crisis centres in Central and North-Western Russia during the years 2004 and 2008–2010, based on participant observation, interviews with staff members, volunteers and clients of the centres, and collecting different written materials and photographing.

My position has been one of a foreign researcher, coming to the crisis centres from outside, but gradually becoming familiar with the practices of the centres and “getting inside”. I have found this balancing between insider-outsider positions and being somewhere in between as a fruitful standpoint from the perspective of exploring the construction processes. I have been close enough to understand, but distant enough not to take things granted, and this has enabled producing a rich data to be analysed in my further works.

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