

Report from the network meeting for the partners within the project "Bridging experiences: prevention of gender based violence and trafficking in Finland and Northwest Russia"

Venue: Mariehamn, the Åland Islands

Date: 16-17 November 2009

"When you hold a bar of soap in your hands, it easily slips away. Gender issues are like soap, you always need return to them", emphasized the expert in gender equality Mia Hanström during a training for network partners from Lithuania, Belarus and Russia, who came together in Mariehamn, Åland, in the middle of November 2009.

All in all 8 representatives from the partner organisations visited the Åland Islands in order to gain further knowledge in the field of preventing trafficking and other forms of gender based violence, to share information about the latest gender equality developments and the situation of women in the respective countries as well as to discuss the prospects for future cooperation. The network meeting was organised in the frame of the cooperation project "Bridging experiences: prevention of gender based violence and trafficking in Finland and Northwest Russia", which is financed by the Nordic Council of Ministers. The project aims at establishing a sustainable cooperation between the Åland Islands Peace Institute and the new partners from the Northwest Russia, The Karelian Center for Gender Studies, and facilitating an exchange of experiences with other NGOs that are a part of the network developed by the Åland Islands Peace Institute in the neighbouring area.

The Åland Islands Peace Institute has played an important role in introducing the Girl group method in Lithuania, Belarus and the Kaliningrad region as a tool for preventing trafficking and social exclusion. Therefore the first day of the network meeting was used for discussing the challenges and approaches of the method together with the author of the manual for Girl and Boy group leaders and an expert in gender equality Mia Hanström. Among other things, she highlighted that the implementation of the method might take slightly different forms depending on the context and the target group, but a gender conscious approach is crucial if empowerment is to succeed. The same principle applies to the Boy group activities, which have recently been initiated as a complement to the Girl group activities and aim at questioning the dominant masculine norms and society's masculine ideal. Group leaders who took part in the training with Mia Hanström pointed out that boys enjoy and appreciate the meetings as much as girls do, but they have less experience in taking new initiatives and coming up with own ideas. All the participants of the meeting expressed a wish to attend a longer training and learn more about the theory and practice of the Girl and Boy group method.

The representatives from the Karelian Center for Gender Studies followed the discussions with a great interest as their organisation is planning to take on a role of the external evaluator in a new cooperation project with the Åland Islands Peace Institute. Their main task will be to assess the personal development and the change in attitudes among the project beneficiaries (men, women, girls and boys) who will be involved in different types of gender equality activities in Lithuania and the Kaliningrad region with a start in 2010. The Åland Islands Peace Institute has recently launched a similar cooperation project with the Resource Center for Women "Marta" in Riga, Latvia, which was presented to the meeting participants by the project manager Denis Nazarenko. He informed that the project "Challenging Gender Roles for Prevention Trafficking" highlights the importance of youth empowerment as a tool for promoting more respectful gender relations and reducing the risk of gender based crimes, including trafficking. Therefore an effective way of preventing trafficking is to adopt methods

that help the young generation to resist the influence of traditional gender roles and to make their own choices based on knowledge, individual values and beliefs. The Girl and Boy group activities that will be implemented both on the Åland Islands and in Latvia are expected to enhance the participants' social skills and networks, to strengthen their possibilities to become active citizens and to reduce the risk of them being marginalized.

The first day of the meeting also included an introduction to the treatment programme for men who are violent towards their partner (and/or children), which is implemented by the Ålandic government in cooperation with the ATV, a Norwegian research and treatment centre for violent offenders and people witnessing or being exposed to violence. Participation in the programme on the Åland Islands is voluntarily and the therapeutic work includes both individual and group treatment. The main treatment principles are focus on violence, focus on responsibility, focus on the client's personal history and focus on the consequences of the violence. The group sessions take place once a week and an average time of the treatment is 2 years. "The method would not work if we force men to participate against their own will. It is important that they are motivated to take responsibility for violence in all its forms", - explained Crister Eriksson, one of the leaders of the group for male batterers.

The following day the researchers from the Karelian Center for Gender Studies, Alexey Lesonen and Larisa Boychenko, presented the results of the media analysis that has been conducted with the goal of studying the references to questions related to gender equality, trafficking and gender based violence in the official and popular media in Lithuania, Belarus and Russia. According to the preliminary results of the study, the highest frequency of references was found in the Lithuanian and the lowest in the Belarusian media. Lithuanian media also had the least number of stereotypical or discriminatory references in regard to women. This can be explained by the fact that gender issues have been mainstreamed for the longest time in Lithuania, which is reflected in the media as well. However, a common thing in all the countries is that articles related to gender equality usually are relatively short and do not get central position in the layout of the newspaper/magazine. Besides, articles that focus on the issue of violence against women as a rule do not include any information about the phenomenon itself or the organisations that work in providing assistance to the victims. Some of the recommendations presented by the researchers were organising trainings for journalists, preparing materials on gender equality that would be distributed together with newspapers/magazines and working on critical media analysis together with young people who are daily exposed and strongly influenced by the views and perspectives presented by the media.

Finally, the partners presented an overview of the current situation in terms of gender equality in every country, including Åland/Finland, and the latest developments in the field of gender based violence, prostitution and trafficking. The participants of the meeting came to conclusion that the global financial crisis has had a negative impact on women in all countries and increased their economic and social vulnerability. Labour migration from the Baltic countries has intensified and a number of desperate women and girls in search for income has created a favourable environment for prostitution and trafficking. In Belarus and Russia the gender awareness in the society is still low though there are certain differences between various regions.

During the final session of the day the participants evaluated the meeting as very useful and stimulating new initiatives. All of them expressed the hope of meeting again in 2010 and continuing the process of experience sharing within the established NGO network.