

Mobilising and Empowering Women on the Margins Experience in an Armenian Context

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"Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another,
be compassionate and humble."

1 Peter 3:8

How to mobilize a community for undertaking self-initiatives and how to empower? These are of the most profound issues that diaconal workers are concerned with. While developmental organizations work responsively and responsible to enable community meet own needs, outcomes and continuation of their activities largely depend on how these efforts manage to contribute to encouragement of participation and practice. Another important aspect related to empowerment is reflection over how diaconal work accompanies people in the process of gaining control over their lives and what motivates to engage in diaconal work. What is the driving force that makes a diaconal worker committed to social work, what is the value base and what are the virtues that guide diaconal work? The answer for these questions for the ecumenical Armenia Round Table Foundation (ART) is in the values of "love, faith and hope." ART believes that community development and sustainable change take place, first and foremost, when communities are engaged in processes of identification and prioritization of their needs and interests, and, secondly, resource sharing, development of common knowledge and experience are carried out in participatory and transparent ways.

As an example, I would like to reflect over experience and lessons learnt from one of the local projects, which was implemented in the most impoverished region of Armenia, Shirak. The project was aimed to improve livelihood of female led families. To this end, capacity building and child care activities were offered to help single mothers become competitive in labour market, and subsequently afford more secured and decent living for their kids, on the one hand, and improve upbringing and pre-school nursing of their children, on the other.

Together with a Gyumri social centre which operates under the auspices of Shirak Diocese of the Armenian Church, the project team applied "see-reflect-act" diaconal model of work (Diakonia in context, 2009), which had been a helpful tool for project planning and implementation, integration of theory and practice. So, according to the model, firstly, the team analysed the situation to understand local context in which the project would be launched. Then the team initially reflected on the results of observations and interviews received during family visits paid by social workers and a priest. For deepening the understanding of the situation home visits and interviews were documented, then the conclusions and recommendations for addressing family needs were discussed with the families and presented in a written form, and then the family file started. The file was developed as work with families progressed further more with records from observations and evaluation. After completing the next stage of theological and analytical reflections, an intervention strategy was developed and a related diaconal activity was designed and realized. Let's see into the details of these stages and achieved results.

The context analysis of the environment dealt with several issues, among those the most poignant were specified. Those were poverty and migration. While the average poverty rate is about 30% in Armenia, Shirak region remains the poorest with 45% of the population below the poverty line (National Statistical Service of Republic of Armenia). Migration in the region is higher compared to other places in the country. Leaving for seasonal work abroad continues to be a means of coping with poverty and limited job prospects in the area.

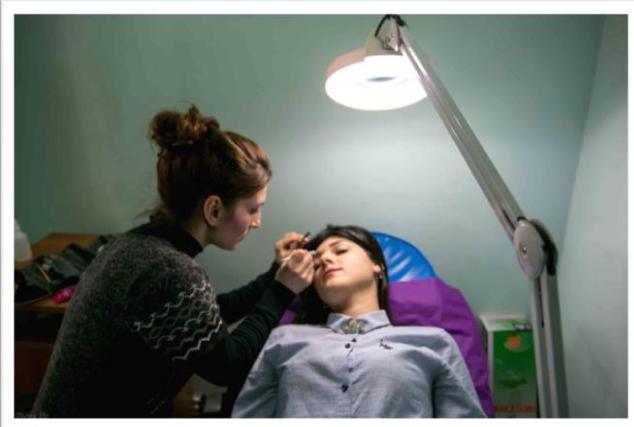
When migrants leave to find work abroad, they often seek to improve the well-being of their family and provide better opportunities for their children in the long run. However, while migration may assist in achieving financial stability, absence of a parent can be detrimental for a family and especially for a child's social and psychological development. Most commonly, migrant workers either reunite with their families for 1-3 months in a year, but they also may end up with starting a new family abroad. Children and women who are left behind constitute a vulnerable category and they deserve specific attention, for women have to undertake a double parental role by replacing missing father at the time of husband's leave, while children who have been suffering from parent's absence display destructive and risky behaviour. The majority of women have a secondary education, which leaves them out of the labour market and at the same time makes them even more socially vulnerable. Being highly exposed to poverty, these families do not have capacity to secure a quality life of their children, who, correspondingly, often suffer from malnutrition and health issues related to poor social and living conditions. Children's education and after-school upbringing is getting more regressive under the care of the unemployed and poorly educated women, and, with the time, their families are losing their resources to cope with poverty and social hardships and grow more marginalized and isolated. Not less important is an issue of sexually transmitted diseases which are passed to women through their migrant worker husbands. Women are particularly subjected to equity deficit and are more vulnerable to domestic violence, exploitation and trafficking. On the next stage of the project the team got further into the situation analysis and explored the experiences and life stories of the families that were visited for inclusion into project. With the aim to engage the families in the development of the intervention strategy and to answer their needs the questions of how they see their situation and what are their perspective and vision for next steps were asked and analyzed. Following the "see-reflect-act" model, ART and Gyumri social centre, discerned over own motivation and commitment to respond, reflected over questions of what diaconal activity may be relevant, how do we denounce injustice and exclusion, and empower? The conducted reflection and discussions have resulted in elaboration and implementation of a diaconal activity which was involved in the different areas of work. Through pastoral and psychological counselling the team worked with the women and members of their families to build their resilience, restore self-esteem and advice how to cope with family related issues.

A series of awareness raising meetings was organized to raise awareness about such issues as trafficking, gender based violence, domestic violence, labour exploitation, sex discrimination. These activities were carried out in cooperation with human rights organizations and organizations specialized in prevention work and supporting women in need. Usually, the agenda of the meetings included an introduction from an invited speaker and further learning from sharing the experiences in the group. Another direction of work was focused on communication of marketable skills to women. This direction contained carrying out Vocational courses on hairdressing and make up, elderly care, sewing and cooking. The list of activities was offered to women and enrolment to the course was conducted basing on personal preference, capacity, free choice. Furthermore, with the aim to assist women with possible employment the project team linked the graduates of courses with the local employment centre and business enterprises, conducted a labour fair in Gyumri social centre. About 50% of graduates (more than 40 people) obtained or secured their employment in a way that they either offered their skills and services on their own or had got regular jobs from the employees. Within the centre a team consisting of a pedagogue, social worker, psychologist, interns from local Pedagogical University and volunteers with different professional backgrounds launched work with children from the single parent families in order to avail the women time for employment and to assist them with child upbringing. The arranged day care offered hot meals, games, exercises, music listening, singing, fairy tales reading, creative arts and crafts along with comfortable and safe environment to children. Individual work with kids and family members was carried out by a psychologist and priest. Educational and cultural activities as well as celebrations on different public and church events were organized. Feedback from families was positive because it led to certain improvements within families.

For Tatevik Atoyan, who is 29 y.o., single mother, taking care of her two children and parents-in-law and whose husband, a migrant-worker abandoned his family many years ago, it had a big individual impact. Tatevik shares, "The training was a great chance for me to get out of home, fell-out of depression and earn living for my kids" (personal communication 29.9.2016). Tatevik was unemployed, when she participated in a two months vocational course on cosmetology in Gyumri social centre. Being active and diligent student, Tatevik was quick to grasp new knowledge and to apply it.



Soon after Gyumri centre had linked Tatevik with the territorial employment office, Tatevik was offered an occupation at one of the local beauty salons. She is now more self-reliant and confident that she can take better care of her family. These days there is a great joy in Tatevik's family, because her husband has reunited with the family and will stay in the country. Whether it was another unintended effect of the project's impact or not it is difficult to discern, but what can be said for sure is that Tatevik left the Centre with more strength and belief in her own capacity.



During the term of project implementation some of the separated families reunited and some restored relations with parents-in-law, children met their grandparents with whom they had stopped contacting after parents separation or migration. The women, who were involved in the project, mobilized and organized peer support groups. These self-formed groups assisted each other with home chores and child care when needed. This way the community mobilized itself on the base of solidarity and mutual support. Relations and cohesion have been continuing beyond project, which is an inspiring result and a value in itself, but, what is more, it demonstrates the sustainable outcome for the community's well-being.

To conclude, the project was evaluated as effective in attending to the needs of more than 100 female led households, their children and family members. The project gave a valuable insight of how and when change takes place. People are likely to mobilize and act upon issues that they find important when activity is responding to the need in participatory and reflective method of work. Building on initial success, ART and Gyumri projected another cycle of three year work and plan an expanded intervention towards raising economic and social capacity of vulnerable female headed households. The project has achieved its targets and objectives of assisting females to regain control over their lives and become more confident and supportive of their children and family members.

This project is one of the most significant examples of Church response and joint effort with other actors towards community mobilization and empowerment. Under the Church facilitation the project availed space for different organizations to act together for public benefit and improvement of livelihood conditions of female led families.



Make up course



Hairdressing course



Sewing course



Cooking course



Dance classes for women and children



Day care centre

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