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Training Needs of Support Workers Working with Vulnerable Women

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The "Discussion Papers" series aims at widely disseminating the research results of KMOP's various activities, stimulating academic discussion and offering a forum for new approaches on contemporary social issues.

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Introduction

EMPOWER (Educational Materials for Practitioners providing Opportunities for vulnerable Women's Employability and Resilience) is a 3-year project co-funded by the European Commission under the framework of Erasmus plus Programme (Key Action 2: Strategic Partnerships for Vocational Education and Training). EMPOWER is implemented by a transnational consortium of partners, i.e. Inova Consultancy Ltd (UK), KMOP - Family and Childcare Centre (GR), Icelandic Red Cross (IS) and Social Innovation Fund (LT).

As part of the project's activities, a transnational survey was conducted in all EMPOWER partner countries and aims at investigating the support and training needs of Support Workers working with vulnerable women. The present document is an executive summary of the survey's full national report that was compiled in Greek. It comprises three parts: a literature review of the profile and services provided by Support Workers working with vulnerable women in Greece, with an outlook of some organisations providing such services; the outcomes of the focus group in which Support Workers were consulted on their training needs and opinions regarding the specific skills they consider essential for their services; and the results of an on-line survey addressed to volunteer and professional support worker regarding the same subjects in order to provide a more comprehensive picture and add to the information obtained through the literature review and focus groups.

Literature Review Findings

Profiles of volunteer and professional support workers in Greece.

Support workers in Greece offer support to various vulnerable population groups, such as unemployed, homeless, substance abusers, victims of violence etc. Vulnerable women are a particularly sensitive group, due to the additional disadvantages to which they are subject due to their gender, such as discrimination, violence, stereotypes, trafficking and so on.

When it comes to vulnerable women's (re)inclusion to society and the labour market, support workers contribute significantly to the improvement of vulnerable women's mental capacities and personal development. This group of professionals comprises workers coming from many scientific disciplines and sectors, such as:

- Psychiatrists
- psychologists,
- therapists,
- doctors,
- nurses,
- sociologists,
- social workers,
- lawyers,
- pedagogist,

- adult trainers,
- career counsellors,
- mentors,
- life coaches,
- administrative staff working in relevant services.

These workers may have various educational background levels, ranging from secondary education to university degree or post-graduate holders, while a significant portion is specialised in the provision of services tailored to the specific needs of vulnerable women. There is also a significant number of people supporting women on a voluntary basis, providing services through NGOs and volunteering organisations. This group may additionally include people acting as mentors and personal coaches, but without necessarily having the corresponding educational background. It is difficult to estimate the number of volunteers working in this field, mainly due to a lack of rigorous data regarding volunteerism in Greece, although the numbers are estimated to be significant, due to the increased influx of immigrants and refugees entering the country in recent years.

Professionals are mainly employed in support structures, including nursing homes, public services managed by the government, counselling centres, guesthouses and gender-equality support centres, municipalities' social services, VET centres, consulting companies and others. Some of the most prominent services supporting vulnerable women, in which support workers are employed, are listed below:

- **National Employment Agency (OAED):** It is the main state employment and employability promoting agency in Greece, and implements programmes for labour market access, while also offering career guidance and counselling services, often addressed to vulnerable population groups and women's employment and entrepreneurship in particular.
- **General Secretariat for Gender Equality (GSGE):** It is the state organisation responsible for the design and implementation of gender equality policies. Among others, it has established and operated counselling centres for women victims of violence, which are staffed by scientists specialised in counselling women from a gender perspective and offer information, psychosocial support, legal counseling and legal aid in cooperation with local lawyers' associations and referral to guesthouses, hospitals, child support services etc. The GSGE also operates a national hotline for women victims violence on both Greek and English.
- **National Centre for Social Solidarity (EKKA):** It is the national agency responsible for coordinating social support and care services for people, families or children in need of immediate aid, such as refugees and unaccompanied minors. Among its other services, it offers guesthouse facilities for the temporary housing, feeding and protection of vulnerable groups, such as abused women and victims of trafficking.
- **Municipal Social Services:** They offer free psychological and career counselling programmes to vulnerable groups, as well as various skills' development workshops and seminars, such as basic ICT workshops. They also coordinate or undertake the provision of aid such as food, clothing, medicine etc. to people in need, such as the homeless.

- **NGOs:** they contribute significantly to the social and labour market (re)inclusion of vulnerable women, offering targeted interventions usually funded by the EU or nationally.

Training of professionals supporting vulnerable women in their social and labour market integration

In Greece, privately employed professionals supporting vulnerable groups are usually trained through certified programmes offered by consulting companies and VET centres active in lifelong learning and vocational training. The programmes are certified through the National Vocational Qualification and Career Counselling Organisation (EOPPEP), which is subject to the Ministry of Education. On the other hand, publicly employed professionals usually receive training through programmes implemented by the Education Institute of the National Centre for Public Administration and Local Government (EKDDA). Training programmes are designed according to the needs of the workers, which are determined by dedicated research teams aiming to develop the skills of public workers according to the strategic targets set by policy makers and the needs determined through relevant analyses.

Finally, many support workers seek out personal development through post-graduate courses and educational seminars conducted as part of European Programmes that pertain to the specific field and are implemented by various government agencies and NGOs.

Training needs of professionals supporting vulnerable women in their social and labour market integration

A literature survey did not reveal any documented studies on the training needs of support workers dealing with vulnerable women's social and labour market inclusion. The only relevant data available pertain to the training needs of consultant psychologists working in "second chance" schools, which are mostly addressed to members of vulnerable social groups, including women. According to the relevant survey, about 47% of participating psychologists stated that further training is essential for providing efficient and modernised services and skills development, while a large number of subjects such as school conflict resolution, peer support, social skills, emotional intelligence and keeping up-to-date with developments in the field were rated as essential for further development and provision of efficient services by 75% of the survey participants.

Focus groups' findings

In order to ensure participation in the focus group, KMOP utilised its extensive network of partner organisations from various projects and initiatives. The focus groups took place on April 14th, 2016, in KMOP's offices in Thessaloniki. Due to a transit workers' strike, only 9 professionals and 8 volunteer Support workers were able to attend each group, respectively.

The main findings of the two groups were:

- Participants of both groups were employed at NGOs and municipal social services. Most provided support to vulnerable women, but some worked with various vulnerable groups, among which were women.
- The main support services' and training providers mentioned by the groups were the National Employment Agency's (OAED), various vulnerable groups' support programmes, municipal social services, lifelong learning programmes and NGOs. Especially regarding employability, the services were considered ineffective, as they tend to be temporary placements that neither add to the vulnerable women's skills nor do they provide sufficient aid so that the women can escape hostile environments that make them vulnerable (e.g. domestic violence victims). Also, the country's poor economic environment is not favourable towards less resilient population groups, such as vulnerable women and the lack of comprehensive interventions involving psychosocial counselling renders measures ineffective.
- The main barriers that vulnerable women face in accessing support services are the following: geographic (especially for women living in poor rural areas), economic (finding financial resources), limited internet access, limited access to information, the stigma associated with needing such services, lack of language skills leading to social exclusion (especially for immigrants). Additionally, volunteers mentioned that many women are not aware of their rights and may be afraid to seek help (e.g. victims of trafficking or domestic violence).
- According to professionals, some motives that could prove effective in facilitating women's access to support services were: better dissemination of information regarding the availability of support services, better promotion of the services so that stigma is avoided, use of mass media for marketing the services and building an image of trust, making more women eligible for support and youth sensitisation to combat social exclusion. Volunteers also emphasised sensitisation and awareness raising, particularly for women's rights, and stressed that service providers should make greater efforts to extend their outreach to women instead of waiting for women to seek support on their own.
- Some of the measures that professionals proposed for supporting women and improving their employability included personalised support according to the needs of each woman, combining employability support with psychosocial counselling, provision of day care services for mothers and skills' development through workshops, seminars and training programmes. Volunteers also emphasised the building of trustful relationships through personalised psychosocial counselling and approaching vulnerable women through street work.

- On the subject of training and skills' development needs, both professionals and volunteers focused mainly on formal training and "hard" skills, such as language and ICT skills, as they considered them in general easier to promote among women, especially if they are accompanied by some sort of certification. They also considered them as essential steps so that women can seek further training and development.
- As for basic skills necessary for supporting vulnerable women, participants opined that being receptive and a good listener is essential, as well as showing professionalism when providing psychosocial support to this particular group. They also considered essential to know one's limits and be willing to refer their charge to other services appropriately, building a relationship of trust with women and being free of stereotypes and from being judgemental. Volunteers move more or less on the same lines, stressing the importance of having the necessary emotional intelligence and maturity to support these women effectively.
- As needs of the training workers needs to provide more effective services, the basic tools that were mentioned were awareness on targeted training programmes for professionals, networking with other associated agencies, coordination with these agencies in order to provide more comprehensive services and exchanging good practices with European colleagues in order to gain more expertise and know-how. Volunteers, on the other hand, believed in on-the-job-training, mentioning that experience will lead to the development of the necessary skills regardless of formal training.
- In closing, when asked about their expectations from a project such as EMPOWER, professionals stated that such a programme will need to aid the empowerment of women and provide access to knowledge, tools and resources available to other organisations across Europe in order to facilitate the exchange of technical expertise. On the other hand, volunteers said that a certification would make the material and training more attractive, and that the use of an electronic training platform would also facilitate intragroup networking between trainees and Support Workers.

On-line Survey Findings

The main goal of the questionnaire was to investigate the training needs of professional and volunteer Support Workers working with vulnerable women, as well as the main challenges they face in fulfilling their role. The questionnaire was implemented on-line and distributed in the form of e-mail notifications to KMOP's partner organisations that support vulnerable women as part of their main activities. In total 30 anonymous questionnaires were obtained, 15 from professional support workers and 15 from volunteers.

The main findings obtained through the relevant responses were as follows:

- Of the mostly female (more than 70%) workers that participated, most of them were relatively young (25-44 years old), with volunteer workers being slightly older. Professionals were in general better educated than volunteers and were full-time employees, whereas some volunteers were mainly occupied with their volunteering activities or were working part-time, while others were also employed. Both groups had on average about 9 years of experience working with vulnerable women, and had either received training at their workplace or had participated in seminars and training programmes.
- The main types of services the two groups provided were psychosocial support to unemployed, victims of violence and mentally ill women, as well as immigrants. Volunteers also supported HIV positive women and single mothers. Volunteers also provided a wider range of services, offering employability and legal counselling services as well. Almost all participants worked at organisations having gender sensitive and non-discrimination policies, and had received training on the provision of such services.
- The main services and practices that respondents were aware of were various lifelong learning programmes, European-funded start-up support programmes, agencies such as the Centre for Gender Equality Research, the General Secretariat for Gender Equality and NGOs targeting vulnerable women, as well as public day care services aimed at improving the employability of mothers. Volunteers also mentioned personalised counselling services, without giving specific examples.
- Regarding vulnerable women's training needs, professionals emphasised formal skills and training such as ICTs, job-specific training and foreign languages, as well as basic entrepreneurial skills such as planning and financial management. Volunteers were mostly focused on social or informal skills, such as communication, soft skills such as self-confidence, networking, management, presentation skills and preparing a CV.
- The two groups agreed that counselling services should firstly be psychosocial in nature aim at empowering vulnerable women and building their self-confidence, with a smaller portion mentioning the need for employability improvement services.
- Both groups' self-evaluation on skills was above average, with volunteers tending to evaluate themselves more positively than professionals.
- Both groups stated that they would feel comfortable teaching soft skills to vulnerable women, again with volunteers providing on average higher ratings than professionals.

Conclusions and Recommendations

From the present survey, it is evident that professionals and volunteers supporting vulnerable women in Greece comprise many specialties, including health professionals, social scientists and career counsellors and also personnel of lower formal qualifications. Both professionals and volunteers are mainly employed through various schemes such as public services, municipal services, hospitals, counselling centres, guesthouses, gender equality structures, VET centres and counselling companies.

Professionals working in this sector are mainly trained through certified programmes offered through consulting companies and VET centres working in lifelong learning, whereas those working in the public sector usually receive government-subsidised training through relevant programmes. Some also seek out seminars, post-graduate courses and workshops, both in Greece and in the EU.

Regarding the training needs of professionals and volunteers in order to support vulnerable women in improving their employability more effectively, one could make the following recommendations in order to improve the services provided.

- The effectiveness of the outreach strategies for vulnerable women should be improved, even if that involves street work. Vulnerable women are likely to be hesitant to seek out support from the relevant services and this is a barrier that needs to be overcome.
- Services should be personalised and adapted to the needs of each beneficiary.
- Career guidance should be combined with psychosocial counselling in order to improve women's self confidence and develop their soft skills.
- Low-skilled women should be provided with the opportunity to develop some formal skills, such as ICTs and language skills (either foreign or Greek).
- Women with higher formal skills should be provided with specialised training, such as entrepreneurship.
- Soft skills should constitute a major part of the provided services.

Furthermore, the following measures could provide beneficial for workers supporting vulnerable women:

- Information dissemination regarding training programmes and professional skills' development workshops for professionals
- Lifelong learning programmes for professionals.
- Inter-service networking
- Coordination with other service type providers in order to offer comprehensive support.
- Networking with professionals on a European level in order to be informed about policies and practices applied.
- Training available on-line.

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