



Civil society's engagement for hands-on help in times of crises: example on migrant women

Before I speak about some projects which my INGO, Soroptimist International of Europe, has done in favor of migrant women, I would like to share with you a more general thought.

In times of crisis, like the arrival of thousands of migrants and refugees in Europe in 2015, many members of civil society are compassionate and willing to help. However, this positive energy is usually difficult to channel and to maintain as those who volunteer to help are not organised in a useful structure and don't have sufficient specific knowledge. Individuals can give a hand, but usually there is not much that they can do in a sustainable way.

If however, a group of persons is organised in some sort of structure and if those persons know each other and have already in the past volunteered to set up projects to help those in need, the probability is much higher that this group can also set up practical and pertinent help in times of crisis.

My NGO is made up of such groups of persons. We are organised in clubs. Within a club, there is experience on how to set up projects; we know what to expect from each other; and above all, we share the desire to help those in need and to defend human rights. Of course, Soroptimist International is not the only INGO of this kind. In all these organisations, there is much willingness to help, to fund, to support, to lobby.

It is my impression that a closer cooperation between these service organisations on one hand and professionals in disaster relief and in the defence of human rights on the other hand could be useful. Their advice could lead to even more fruitful projects by those highly motivated members of civil society who are already organised in well-established structures.

Now I will present two examples on how Soroptimist clubs worked with and for migrant women. Those projects are not spectacular, but this is not what is needed to help migrant women to get integrated into our societies. It is just some everyday help that we could provide.

In several countries, Soroptimist clubs have set up vocational training for migrant women, which included also the introduction to local customs and folklore in order to help them to understand their host country. There have been common sports activities and outings.

Turkish clubs, with funding from other European clubs, have given first aid assistance and they have given workshops on carpet weaving to Syrian refugee women. They also have donated school supplies to Syrian refugee children, as well as clothing and food.

During the COVID crisis, though, we all had to obey to the lockdown regulations. There were no exceptions possible that I know of. All projects with migrants have stopped. A high-ranking symposium on the integration of migrant women into the German society had to be cancelled.

Bettina Hahne

Soroptimist International of Europe

Representative to the Council of Europe