

# Social work in refugee centres in Poland



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In this text I would like to draw attention to refugee centres as an important context for the social work field. In order to understand the context in which the centres operate, it is necessary to point to visible trends in the EU migration policies, that is: criminalisation of external migration into the EU, sealing of the external borders, deterrence and restrictionism (Sigona, 2005). Additionally, the asylum application procedures themselves are often marked by “culture of disbelief” (Jubany, 2011), which is a phenomenon characterised by distrust towards asylum seekers.

Refugee centres in Poland, which I examine in my doctoral project (the project received funding from the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education) as an element of migration and integration policies, are influenced by these trends. Studies show that in Poland, the existing alternatives to detention of asylum seekers, are rarely used and detention is used as a tool for managing migration issues, which is consistent with the trend of criminalisation, when even children are sometimes held in guarded centres managed by the Border Guard (Chmelickova, 2006; Sieniow, 2013; Białas, et al., 2014).

Regarding “open” refugee centres (both reception and residential centres), where asylum seekers can live during the application process, there are twelve of them in Poland – out of this number four are owned by a government authority – the Office For Foreigners [UdSC] (UdSC, n. d.; 2014) and the rest is managed by private entities which won public tenders. I analyse the centres as educational sites, i.e., places where asylum seekers go through initial socialisation to the host society and where broadly understood educational processes occur. This is a reference to a Polish notion of “wychowanie” (and Latin “educare”) (Zielińska, Kowzan, Prusinowska, 2011), which Miller defined as “an intervention into the dialectic relation between a human being and the world; it regulates their reciprocal relations by [taking] creative interaction concerning development of society and the individual” (1981: 122). Refugee centres are an essential part of migration and integration policy and the perspective of intentional processes of education (wychowanie) taking place in them stresses the importance of social workers as key actors. However, refugee centres are also a part of migration control system and categories such as total institution or disciplining institution have been used to describe them (Ząbek & Łodziński, 2008).

I chose to concentrate on social work, because it is an essential element of inclusion/exclusion within the framework of nation states, while at the same time, social workers might take roles on behalf of both a state and the European Union (Christie, 2003). It is especially important because “social workers” in Polish refugee centres are public servants (and are a part of civil service), but formally are not social workers, as the profession is regulated by a separate law. However, the staff organize and conduct social work activities and are informally called social workers and some strongly identify themselves as such.

Olubiński’s classification of social workers’ functions includes: rescue, compensation, protection, facilitation, prophylactic and political functions (2004). However, I wanted to

focus on the last one. Marta Kochanowska (2008) states that the political function, understood as the staff influencing the functioning of the Office for Foreigners or migration policy in general, is practically non-existent in the practice of social workers in refugee centres. However, from my interviews with the staff it is visible that this function might be partially fulfilled through processes of organisational feedback procedures and cooperation with NGOs. Such influence might be of importance especially when centres operate under private, for-profit entities (it is a part of a broader conflict between the public and the private, which increases the temporality of centres' residents, but also of their staff). Additionally, work overload and limited number of staff members result in difficult choices between people and administrative tasks; under such circumstances there is little space for social work or developing intercultural dialogue. Consequently, NGOs take over and try to fill the systemic gaps in services for asylum seekers in the application procedure. Moreover, such a situation may result in an increase of the precarity of asylum seekers' situation, eg., because of the temporal character of NGOs' work (their projects depend highly on external funding schemes and competing for grants).

Summarizing, the issue of refugee centres is crucial for the social work field because it is an example of social work practitioners working outside the formal boundaries of the profession. What is more, this is also an essential context for social work researchers and professionals since asylum seekers' stay in refugee centres is an important stage of potential further integration processes (after receiving a refugee status), which, e.g., in Poland will also involve formal social workers from regional family support centres. Moreover, the European dimension of social work in refugee centres (also in the context of the EU migration policies) can be explored by looking through the lens of possible international alliances within the social workers' community aiming at social solidarity (Christie, 2003).

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