October, 18th 2024

9.00 – 17.00 h

TU Berlin, Room H1035

Conference: The Impact of Gendered Migration Cycles on the Labour Market Integration of Female Migrants in European Welfare States – Developing Pathways towards Gender-responsive Policies

Presentation: Volunteering as Political Activism in Extreme Socio-political Contexts: A Case of Recent Volunteers in Nantes

Presenters: Natalia Vershinina,

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Paradigm shift_new Outlooks

Volunteering as Political Activism in Extreme Socio-political Contexts: A Case of Recent Volunteers in Nantes

Natalia Vershinina, Daria Serbichenko, Yuliya Shymko

Introduction

- Migrant market integration issues for war refugees: volunteering as option to enter labour market

- *Volunteering* is the act of freely offering one's time, skills, or services without monetary compensation to benefit others, organizations, or causes.

- In this talk we explore the alternative view: volunteering as a response to war and political crisis

- Developing new theoretical framework: Volunteering as political action and resistance

Conceptual Separation of Political Activism and Volunteering

- *Political Activism*: Focused on systemic change through collective action and confrontation of policies. (Della Porta & Diani, 2006)

- *Volunteering:* Seen as altruistic, apolitical, focused on individual care, often addressing symptoms, not causes. (Hustinx et al., 2003)

- *Volunteering:* beyond individual choice, emphasizing the need to consider the social structures that influence it (Wilson, 2012; Hustinx et al., 2010). "Thick volunteering" concept describes volunteering embedded in dense social relations (Eckstein, 2001; McNamee and Peterson, 2014).

- *Why the separation:* Volunteering is framed as non-confrontational, while activism directly challenges the status quo. (Beveridge & Koch, 2017)

Volunteering as political action and resistance

- **Volunteering as Ethics of Care** (Anderssen, et.al, 2022)

  - *Volunteering as Care Politics*: Care work becomes political when addressing systemic failures (e.g., state neglect of refugees). (Tronto, 1993)

- **Volunteering as political resistance** (Slim, 2022)

  - *Beyond Survival*: Refugee volunteering evolves into advocacy for rights and dignity, transforming care into political action. (Ticktin, 2011)

  - *Solidarity:* Volunteering shifts from charity to solidarity, creating collective power for systemic change. (Featherstone, 2012)

  - *Activism*: Relevance of the concept of commitment (ʾI-tizām) as a technique of activism, questioning how activists achieve their goals and the ways they choose to live their engagement (Mauss, 2006; Hermez, 2011).

Our study: 20 interviews & thematic analysis

№	Name	gender	age	city	country	year of arrival	marital status	works or not	kids
1	Daria	F	41	Dnipro	Ukraine	2014	single	yes	0
2	Karina A	F	33	Kryvyi Rih	Ukraine	2019	married	no	0
3	Karyna K	F	28	Marhanets	Ukraine	2020	married	yes	0
4	Katia T	F	26	Novossibirsk	RF	2018	married	yes	0
5	Olga M	F	28	Jytomyr	Ukraine	2017	single	yes	0
6	Katia H	F	24	Zaporijia	Ukraine	2022	single	no	0
7	Natalia Sh	F	40	Tchernihiv	Ukraine	2022	single	no	0
8	Svitlana	F	40	Dnipro	Ukraine	2022	single	no	2
9	Iryna	F	48	Mariupol	Ukraine	2022	married	no	2
10	Natali K	F	52	Kyiv	Ukraine	2022	single	no	4
11	Anastasia	F	36	Moscow	RF	2016	married	yes	2
12	Galyna	F	48	Horlivka	Ukraine	2022	single	yes	1
13	Islam	M	44	Grozniy	Chechen Republic	2007	single	no	7
14	Selima	F	20	Grozniy	Chechen Republic	2010	single	no	0
15	Olga V	F	28	Louhansk	Ukraine	2022	single	yes	1
16	Aleksandr	M	30	Stavropol	RF	2018	single	yes	0
17	Anna	F	40	Arkhangelsk	RF	2003	married	yes	2
18	Andrii	M	30	Kryvyi Rih	Ukraine	2014	single	yes	0
19	Natalia	F	45	Vilnius	Lituanie	2000	married	yes	2
20	Alina	F	33	Dnipro	Ukraine	2012	married	no	2

Motivations for Engaging in Volunteer Activism

- Draw on research about the *meaning of work* (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003), *sensemaking* (Weick, 1995), and the *cultural response to disaster* (Wuthnow, 2010)
  - Kent(2019) developed a theory that explains how people give positive or negative meaning to their work after disaster / terrorism.
  - The theory proposes that **societies rally around moral narratives** following terrorist events, and **individuals attempt to integrate these narratives into their work** to **restore a sense of order and belonging** (Pyszczynski et al., 1999; Simko, 2012).

- Immediate response to crisis

- Coping mechanism for personal stress and trauma

- Desire for collective action and change

+ *Karina*: "It seems to me that it is such a critical situation, it is of such a large scale that in order to change something, everyone must be included."

+ Wilson (2000) argues that volunteering in crisis situations often stems from a combination of altruistic motivations and personal coping strategies.

Forms of Political Action Through Volunteering

- Organizing humanitarian aid

- Supporting Ukrainian refugees

- Educating others about Ukraine's history and identity, protecting national culture

- Challenging aggressor narratives

o *Daria*: "We started donating (sending money), we started collecting humanitarian aid here in Nantes, and I started working with Ukrainians in three ways..."

o Paine et al. (2010) discuss how volunteering can be a form of civic engagement and political participation, especially in contexts of social and political upheaval.

Emotional Dimensions of Activist Volunteering

- High levels of empathy and emotional labour

- Burnout and exhaustion

- Difficulty maintaining emotional boundaries

o *Daria*: "After the first month of work, I already started to have my first burnout; as a result, I had three burnouts during this whole period..."

o *Karina*: "I think I had burnout during this period, three times... The first few months it was like you were a steam engine non-stop doing everything."

o Maslach and Leiter (2016) highlight the prevalence of burnout among volunteers engaged in emotionally demanding work, emphasizing the need for self-care strategies.

Challenges in Volunteer Activism

- Lack of appreciation from some beneficiaries

- Feeling exploited or undervalued

- Navigating complex volunteer-recipient relationships

- Financial instability and lack of institutional support

+ Karina: "People even stop being respectful in some way... I have the feeling that you are being used, it frustrates me very much."

+ Baines and Cunningham (2011) discuss the challenges faced by volunteers in crisis situations, including emotional strain and lack of structural support.

Gendered Dimensions of Volunteer Activism

- Women's disproportionate involvement in care work and emotional labour

- Balancing activist roles with personal/professional aspirations

+ *Daria:* "We visited hotels, and also Ukrainians saw me as a person to whom they could tell their problems."

+ Evans (2016) examines the gendered nature of volunteer work, particularly in crisis contexts, where women often assume caregiving and emotional support roles.

Personal Growth and Identity Transformation

- Development of new skills (e.g., boundary-setting, communication)

- Reassessment of career goals and personal priorities

- Tension between activist identity and individual fulfilment

+ Daria: "I guess I've become more of a judge of people... I've probably become a little bit more strict, but the staff tell me that I have a plus one, that I can tell people no, but by doing it carefully."

+ Brown and Pickerill (2009) explore how activism shapes personal identity and the challenges of balancing activist commitments with individual well-being.

Community Building and Solidarity

- Formation of supportive networks among volunteers

- New friendships and collective identities

  o Karina: "New acquaintances have appeared besides the Ukrainians, these are the people with whom we are now not only a team and a collective, but we are also friends."

  o Della Porta and Diani (2006) discuss the role of social networks and collective identity formation in sustaining social movements and activist engagement.

Implications for Inclusive Organizing

- Need for structural support and clear boundaries

- Importance of aligning roles with individual strengths and passions

- Recognizing and addressing gendered patterns in volunteer work

- Promoting self-care and sustainable engagement strategies

- Hustinx and Lammertyn (2003) propose a reflexive volunteer model that acknowledges the diverse motivations and needs of volunteers in contemporary society.

Future Perspectives on Volunteering

- Shift in focus post-crisis (e.g., rebuilding efforts, animal welfare)

- Balancing ongoing activism with personal/professional goals

+ Daria: "When the war is over, volunteering will be reformatted, it will be necessary to rebuild the country."

+ Karina: "I would like to be part of a volunteer movement to protect animals... Helping animals should be more than that."

+ Boichak and McKernan (2022) examine the evolving nature of volunteer narratives in post-conflict contexts, highlighting the shift from immediate crisis response to long-term social change efforts.

Conclusion

- Volunteering is not just an altruistic individual activity. It also offers a complex form of political activism in crisis contexts

- Importance of balancing collective responsibility with personal well-being

- Importance of inclusive, gender-aware approaches in volunteering organizations

- Recognizing the transformative potential of activist volunteering for individuals and society

- Relevance of volunteering work for labour market integration

- Konrad et al. (2023) emphasize the need for a nuanced understanding of grassroots humanitarian response in conflict situations, acknowledging both its political dimensions and organizational challenges.

Discussion Questions

How can volunteer organizations better support activists in extreme contexts? How can labour market recognise volunteering efforts as not just care but also work?

What strategies can be employed to address burnout and promote sustainable engagement?

How can we recognize and value diverse forms of political activism through volunteering?

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