

Cooks Without Homes



Cooks without homes as an upside down charity (Czech Republic)

Summary

Cooks without Homes is an initiative of Homelike (Jako doma), a non-profit organisation focusing on women experiencing homelessness. Homeless women, in the initiative, cook and sell healthy vegan food for a low price or voluntary contribution at farmers' markets and other events. In the future they will do so in their own bistro.

The homeless women have the opportunity of a safe space and community to create supportive social contacts amongst themselves and the chance to gain extra income. They stimulate change in the image of homeless women which is one of passive and somewhat invisible people. They promote social change themselves in offering affordable food to other disadvantaged groups. The success of Cooks without Homes lies in the empowerment of homeless women through participation and partnership as co-workers. The focuses on empowerment alongside the provision of a safe environment are two key gender dimensions to the initiative.

Cooks without Homes started in 2013. Since then, it has been growing in quality, visibility and size. About fifty homeless women have been engaged in the project so far. The current team consists of fourteen homeless women. Initially, the organisation had to seek potential co-workers in different homeless services such as dorms and shelters. Currently it is being contacted by homeless women themselves.

Cooks without Homes were able to organize four food stalls per month at the start. During summer time they now operate every day apart from Sunday. Since October 2014 Cooks without Homes have put in place a catering service and since 2015, they provide four to five catering services per month. They are currently developing their own bistro with a large stone kitchen.

The project is funded by small grants (Nadace Via, Nadace Orlických, Slovensko-Český ženský fond), fundraising events, crowdfunding and by individual donors.

The project is linked to other activities within the Homelike organization addressing and investigating violence against women in vulnerable situations and providing support to homeless women with administrative issues such as debts, housing and social benefits counselling.

Gender aspects of homelessness

Homelessness is identified in the Europe 2020 strategy as one of the most extreme forms of poverty and social exclusion. The first National Strategy for Prevention and Tackling Homelessness (2013-2020) in the Czech Republic (CR) aims to contribute to the fight against poverty. This is an objective, to which the CR has committed itself under the National Reform Program (NRP). The National Strategy for Prevention and Tackling Homelessness (2013-2020) lacks a focus on the gendered aspects of poverty or homelessness. No objectives or measures in the Strategy are focused explicitly on homeless women. The gender aspects of homelessness are also invisible in the Concept of Social Housing in the CR (2015 – 2025). However, the Strategy for Equality of Women and Men in the CR (2014 – 2020) does recognise the gender aspect of homelessness. The increasing vulnerability of homeless women is identified as requiring further investigation.

According to data from the Czech census of homeless people, within the 2011 Census, women accounted for 21.5% of the total of 11,496 homeless people.[1] Some studies show that the representation of young people below 25 years of age, persons with disabilities, and women and families with children increased among the homeless during the period of economic crisis.[2]

Research conducted by the NGO Homelike has established differences in the situation, experience, and needs of homeless women compared to those of homeless men. Homeless women experience severe forms of violence including sexual violence and many are survivors of abuse. There is evidence of particular low self-esteem issues and unmet psychological needs among homeless women. Many are at the intersections with other grounds of discrimination, such as racial or ethnic origin and sexual orientation. Homeless women are one of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in the CR.

The social services and organisations dealing with homelessness do not take account of this gender difference, and thus, they do not develop services tailored to women. In particular, there is a failure to address the need for privacy, safety from violence, and freedom from discrimination. This leads to a cycle of discrimination. When women do not seek and get support in male dominated services, they become invisible to these services, and their needs remain unmet.

These multiple factors make it extremely difficult for these women to seek and keep lasting employment or to enter education or training.

Upside down charity

Cooks without Homes is a project of Homelike. It addresses the problem of women in poverty and, in particular, gender specific homelessness in the CR. The main objectives of Homelike are to: work together with homeless women, to build partnerships; empower and integrate homeless women, and to break the cycle of homelessness; challenge societal attitudes towards homeless women; activate women's own abilities; and highlight the gender specific aspects of homelessness.

The idea for Cooks without Homes was born out of a rejection of the passive image of homeless women and of the charity concept of feeding the poor. This foundation evolved both as a powerful empowerment dynamic for the women involved, and a positive marketing message for their work. Cooks without Homes is an "upside down charity", where the women actively engage in changing the public perception of homelessness. They cook their food for the public, and, thus, disrupt the prevailing image of passivity amongst homeless women.

At the same time, the women are publicly demonstrating their abilities, skills and enthusiasm. Most homeless women want to participate in society. However, gender-based discrimination in the labour market, their low self-esteem and their complex needs render it almost impossible for them to get a lasting job. A new visibility and new perceptions can open up new opportunities. The only possible barrier to their involvement with Cooks without Homes might be the obligation to have a health check when working with food. This is generally not a problem as long as the person has health insurance, but it can be an obstacle for migrant women.

The women in Cooks without Homes present their vegan food stalls at different farmers' markets and at various public and cultural events. Their food is sold for a voluntary contribution or at low price. In this way the initiative promotes the idea of social justice respecting the different financial situations of customers. In this way, homeless women can not only publicly demonstrate their skills, but can also help others in difficult circumstances. This is an important and empowering experience.

The work of Cooks without Homes provides an opportunity for homeless women to meet others in a similar situation, to create, and to be part of a wider supportive community network. Cooks without Homes is also linked to other activities within Homelike including: research, counselling services and self-help groups for homeless women, a theatre group of homeless women, media workshops, appearance at conferences, and public campaigning.

A key gender dimension to the work of Cooks without Homes is creating a safe environment for the women involved. The initiative is rooted in and communicates an understanding of the particular situation and experience of homeless women. This gender dimension enables an empowering relationship for the women involved. The commitment to empowerment is another key gender dimension with the full involvement of the women as partners in the initiative.

Making it work

There are two important impacts evident from the work of Cooks without Homes. First, there is an increase in self-esteem for the homeless women. There has been an empowerment of the women involved in the activities, in particular, through their interaction with the public and the creation of a self-help group. The women themselves note an improvement in their psychological well-being.

Second, there is positive change in the image of homeless women as active and able in the eyes of public and potential employers. This is evident from the growing demand for their catering, including from the business sector. Since 2014, during the summer season, food stalls are organized every day except for Sunday, and Cooks without Homes are serving 5 – 7 catering events per month, including for prestigious scientific awards' events and events at foreign embassies.

Both these effects can have a positive impact on inclusion of homeless women into the society and the labour market. About fifty women have been involved over the course of the initiative, between 2013 and 2015. Seven women succeeded in stabilizing their housing situation and four women found jobs in cooperating restaurants.

In 2013, Cooks without Homes received the award of the Mau association[3] for organisations and individuals supporting the philosophy “Do not eat stupid, do not drink stupid and do not live stupid”. It was awarded the Austrian ‘Sozial Marie’ award for socially innovative projects in 2015. It was among 30 semi-finalists in the European Social Innovation Competition of the European Commission in the same year.

The success of Cooks without Homes lies in its implementation of the principles of partnership, participation and empowerment of homeless women. The initiative offers partnership rather than just help. Women are included in all decision-making processes. Together they democratically build activities, based on respecting diverse experiences, ideas and opinions. Homeless women are seen as co-workers, experts in the field of homelessness, partners and capable people.

A secure future

Cooks without Homes addresses a widespread and persistent problem of extreme poverty and homelessness for women. It is based on a very simple participative concept. It is, therefore, easily replicable elsewhere. There already exists a plan to replicate Cooks without Homes. In 2015, the NGO IQ Roma Service contacted Homelike with the idea for a Cooks without Homes to be implemented by Roma women in Brno in the Czech Republic.

Sustainability is guaranteed through the aim of financial independence of the initiative as a social economy activity. The profit from the products and the services provided is a source of sustainability.

Cooks without Homes plan to open a bistro in 2016 with a large kitchen that will provide them with a stable and professional working environment. In 2015, they found a place in Prague with a nominal rent from a local authority.

The women will have a safe environment, a space for developing their activities, and a place where they will offer healthy and affordable food to the general public including other disadvantaged groups. They will cooperate with farmers and local producers of fruits and vegetables who supply them with surplus food. Food that would otherwise be wasted will be used in the bistro to produce jam, and spreads for sale.

The bistro will offer employment contracts to four women at a time, allowing them to go through a legal process of debt relief. The salaries of two of the women will be covered by the employment office as a wage allowance. The kitchen will also cook for open-air events and caterings, thus employing a further 15 homeless women on a part-time basis. The bistro will offer an affordable alternative to vegetarian restaurants which are very often more expensive than regular restaurants and bistros in the CR.

[1] https://www.czso.cz/csu/sldb/vysledky_scitani_bezdomovcu

[2] Kudy ke dnu, Analýza charakteristik klientů Naděje, o. s., středisko Praha, Bolzanova“, Praha: 2010, SOCIOKLUB, ISBN: 978-80-86140-68-1.25

[3] <http://www.grandrestaurant.cz/pomahame>

Contacts/Further Information

Contacts

Jako doma – Homelike, o.p.s.

Alexandra Doleželová

E-mail: alexandra.dolezelova@jakodoma.org

Tel: 00420 773 480 560

Further information

[Homelike website](#)



[Indiegogo crowdfunding campaign](#)



[Social Innovation Competition 2015](#)



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