

GLOBAL VOICES

From burden to citizen

Every society must have room for all of its citizens each with their own strengths and weaknesses. Such is Jana Tjitjerina's motto in her work as a social educator. But this is an alien mindset for most of the inhabitants in the former Soviet republic of Uzbekistan

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Photos: Malene Fenger-Grøndahl

I have always felt a close affinity for people who are different to the crowd. As a child I felt for those people who were excluded from the community. It was painful for me to see how some people were not allowed to develop their full potential - when disabled children were sent far away to special boarding schools or grown-ups with disabilities were kept shut away at home. Within the field of social work my job is to create the framework for everyone to develop their full potential. Such are the words of Jana Tjitjerina, who is leading a UNDP supported project aimed at establishing social education as an educational discipline and profession in Uzbekistan.

By profession she is a psychologist and part of her job is to draw up subject descriptions, syllabuses and training methods for social worker courses at university level, which were first established three years ago. These include such subjects as law, psychology and sociology, including an understanding of the circumstances of minority groups.

As an ethnic Russian and a Christian, Jana Tjitjerina herself belongs to a minority in the for-

mer Soviet republic, which, with its approximate 25 million inhabitants, is the most densely populated of the young central Asian states. When Jana was growing up there were more Russians in the capital Tashkent than there are today, and Russian was the official language. But most of the children in the playground spoke Tadjik or Uzbek. Tall, red-haired Jana was 'different', and her schoolmates weren't slow to let her know it.

The disabled were regarded as a burden

It may have been the desire to understand the mechanisms behind the formation of groups and marginalisation which inspired Jana to choose psychology as her subject. Jana Tjitjerina is not entirely sure herself. But she is convinced that the experience of being 'different' has helped her in her career as a psychologist specialising in the disabled. "After the break-up of the Soviet Union, our society has become freer. The risk of marginalisation has increased but there are also more opportunities. Previously, disabled people were regarded as burdens, which society paid for but of whom nothing was required. Most disabled people lived in isolation and nobody demanded anything of them except gratefulness for the money they received from the State," she says.

"Only now is that attitude starting to change towards disabled people being regarded as citizens who must contribute to society on an equal footing with everybody else. However, the Government has still not ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities," Jana Tjitjerina explains.

Nevertheless, the Uzbek Government has adopted a series of laws which give disabled persons the right to participate in education and working life. Legislation is not being fully implemented, and only very few disabled people know their rights, and at jobcentres and in private



companies by and large there is very little familiarity with the new rules on salary subsidies and other forms of affirmative action in favour of the disabled. In addition, the salary subsidy rules involve so many obligations that only very few employers could be bothered to employ a disabled person.

Self-stigmatisation

To draw attention to the rights of disabled people Jana Tjitjerina has in collaboration with the Ministry of Labour and a number of NGOs run a series of workshops about the rights of the disabled for employees at the state jobcentres. She has also helped plan an information campaign aimed at the public at large. The campaign included posters with photos of young disabled persons under slogans about the right to integration and citizenship.

“It was a major step for disabled people to raise

According to Jana Tjitjerina there is still far to go along the road to integration of disabled persons into Uzbek society, where it is still a widespread believe that disabled persons are not really a proper part of society.

their visibility in that manner. They were proud to come forward with names and pictures, but they were also treading new ground, since most of them had been brought up to see themselves as unfortunates maintained by charity without any active participation in the life of society. They had stigmatised themselves and thus resigned responsibility for their own lives,” says Jana Tjitjerina.

Together with the NGO ‘Millennium’, which was set up for disabled women in 2003, Jana Tjitjerina has set up a club where disabled persons who wish to enter the labour market can participate in social activities and occupational workshops. The aim is to establish 60-70 positions for disabled persons over the forthcoming year, primarily in small companies which produce decorative art and craft products. The first contracts have already been signed and there are more in the pipeline.

But Jana Tjitjerina stresses that there is still

far to go along the road to integrating disabled persons.

“There is still a widespread belief that disabled people are not really a proper part of society. For example, the right to have a personal escort only applies to disabled persons who live alone. Those who live with their families are not entitled to escorts and are completely dependent on their families. The authorities turn a blind eye to the fact that this practice means that many people cannot even get out to do the shopping let alone get anywhere near an education or job. “The disabled need compensation and support so they can develop on an equal footing with the rest of us. It makes no difference if I run or use a wheelchair - they are just two different methods of getting around. When I enter the doors of my workplace, it doesn't matter how I got there,” says Jana Tjitjerina

Social educators must be recognised

Jana Tjitjerina believes that the establishment of social education as a recognised study subject would be an important step towards a more inclusive society. “The first social educators graduated last year, and there's no doubt we need their knowledge. But jobs don't materialise out of thin air: Potential employers still do not regard social education as a serious study subject in line with psychology and medicine. They see social work as administration of distribution of money to the sick and infirm,” says Jana Tjitjerina.

Thus one crucial challenge for social educators is going to be to establish a strong professional identity based on an entirely different view of people and society than that of the Soviet era,” Jana Tjitjerina believes. As a lecturer for the new university course of education, she tries to challenge her students right from the very first day. “When I teach psychology I start the first lecture with an exercise where my students must place themselves in the position of a disabled person. I don't ask them to put on blindfolds or sit in a wheelchair. Instead, I ask them to recall episodes from their childhood or youth where they felt rejected or marginalised from the community. What did they feel? How would they have liked to have been treated? “I think the best way of understanding what the work of social education is about is to create opportunities for everyone to participate and contribute on their own terms,” says Jana Tjitjerina.

