

THE HUMANITARIAN HEALTH CONSULTATION CENTRE

SECTOR
Health care for migrant families and undocumented migrants without health insurance

COUNTRY
Germany

LEAD ORGANISATION
Maisha e.V. – African Women in Germany, member of the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM)

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Maisha e.V.
African Women in Germany
Afrikanische Frauen in Deutschland

PICUM
PLATFORM FOR INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION ON UNDOCUMENTED MIGRANTS

DESCRIPTION

Maisha e.V. is an organisation that aims to assist African women in Germany in dealing with the German authorities, and society in general. In 2001, Maisha e.V helped to introduce the Humanitarian Health Consultation Centre in Frankfurt as a support service to undocumented pregnant women. This service is essential, since it is common to see undocumented expectant mothers contacting medical services too late in their pregnancies as they fear being reported to authorities, or disappearing soon after birth even if there are complications because they have no money to pay for longer stays in hospital. The objective in designing this programme was therefore to enable mothers to have healthy babies without fear and to provide post-natal care to mothers and their newborns. The main daily task of the service is to help women get an appointment with a clinic and to process their paperwork. Other services include information on sexual and reproductive health and provision of social and psychological counselling with the assistance of cultural mediators.

The City of Frankfurt responded positively to the initiative, considering the important contribution it makes to improving the basic health needs of undocumented, pregnant, and vulnerable women.

Over the years, the organisation has also built partnerships with a wide array of different actors. The City of Frankfurt's Women's Department has provided financing for the organisation's work, the Health Department has facilitated cooperation with doctors, and the Social

Care Department has provided medicine. Moreover, based on information provided by the organisation about the financial difficulties of its client group and with the support of the former Director of the Health Authority, Maisha e.V. was able to negotiate arrangements for special reductions of the normal costs and additional costs for medical complications with a few customer-friendly hospitals.

Initially, this service was entirely dedicated to African women. However, due to high demand it was later enlarged to other undocumented foreign nationals, European nationals without health insurance, rejected asylum seekers, and other expectant mothers.

Services are provided anonymously to address migrants' fears of being denounced or otherwise detected, as required under German law.

A SOCIAL INVESTMENT APPROACH

The Humanitarian Health Consultation Centre endorses a life-cycle approach. Helping pregnant women and newborns has important long-term positive effects by enabling them to develop themselves in a safe environment and progressively become included in society. This is achieved through medical and psychological support, both of which are essential in circumstances such as unwanted pregnancy, miscarriage, or victims of female genital mutilation. Additionally, it is important to remember that investment in health care for people in vulnerable situations brings far-reaching benefits for society as a whole, not the least through prevention; for example, offering service users detailed information about malaria, AIDS, or any other health issue for which they need medication or medical attention prevents the spread of infectious diseases.

More generally, the project has a positive impact in other areas, too. During their visits, women in need often share numerous other issues with volunteers concerning housing problems, alien status, discrimination, health, nutrition, or child care, and Maisha e.V. workers try to provide valuable advice.

It is also very important for the organisation that women are actively involved in designing the service provision, and they are therefore regularly asked to comment on it. Clients do not consider it as another top-down initiative, and they trust Maisha e.V. and the Health Authority that cooperates with them. This is partly due to the fact that the organisation's directors are not distinct from the community and represent various African nationalities.

MAIN ACHIEVEMENTS

Every year, Maisha e.V. helps some 1,500 people in need. This tremendous work has been largely recognised and praised. In 2002, the organisation was awarded the Integration Award by the City of Frankfurt.

Since then the organisation has received many other awards, and several other major city administrations have implemented similar drop-in centres that have 'humanitarian consultation hours' for providing medical consultations.

Maisha e.V. has become one of the leading members of the European Network of Migrant Women.

LOOKING FORWARD

Other cities often ask to visit the Humanitarian Health Consultation Centre, and members of the organisation are regularly invited to talk about the project. It is encouraging to see that it is becoming a benchmark for service provision in Germany and that similar programmes are being developed in other cities.

However, while the benefits of these promising practices are recognised throughout the country, the legal and practical environment is still problematic. The current situation leads to legal inconsistency, unregulated provision of public health services, strain on health professionals (in terms of professional ethics, stress, time and resource limitations), and serious challenges to individual and public health. This situation will have to be improved in the future.