

# “YOU ARE WELCOME HERE”

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*“I am Generation Equality: Realizing Women’s Rights”* was the theme for the 2020 International Women’s Rights Day. This theme asked us to think about the challenges that still need to be overcome to promote equality between the sexes and to put an end to what jeopardises women’s dignity. ATD Fourth World wants to honour women from disadvantaged backgrounds who endure so much suffering. Every day and in every part of the world, they carry out acts of resistance and solidarity in order to survive.

By François Jomini, [ATD Fourth World Volunteer Corps member](#).

Laurence is a young woman who is familiar with poverty and vagrancy in her home country of Switzerland. She knows what it means not to be welcome somewhere. Currently experiencing homelessness, she spends her nights at a crisis centre.

## Giving a warm welcome

Laurence often goes to the centre dormitory ahead of time to be ready to greet those who come to stay there. When a woman arrives for the first time, her face lined with exhaustion and fear, Laurence smiles at her. She holds out her hand and introduces herself by her first name. Knowing the anxiety of being a stranger in a place like this, Laurence reaches out. Perhaps this woman is ill? Thoughtful and attentive, Laurence points out who to go to. Introducing the new woman, Laurence takes her to where she can get herself what she needs.

## People need more than just shelter

*"When you don't know anyone, you are afraid to ask",* says Laurence. She tells the story of a young refugee who seemed particularly lost. Laurence understood that it would be distressing for this young woman to go to the basement to get clothes from the man assigned to distribute them. So Laurence went with her.

- "You have to take your time and explain things gently. I speak a few words in several languages", Laurence says. "And when I don't have the words, I still have gestures".

## It's just what you do

Laurence does not pat herself on the back. *"For me, welcoming someone is all about the little things."* To her, this is just what you do. She mentions some of the Romanian women who don't speak her language. They are so kind, Laurence explains, so welcoming, watching over others in a motherly way.

- "You would think they would have become hardened by the life they have, driven out from everywhere! But no..."

Her face lights up when she talks about these women. In this way, Laurence haltingly implies that all people are represented among those who live in the emergency shelter. The place itself is devoted to never becoming a "home". If there is a humanity to this institution, it does not lie in the physical building. Nor does it only come from the professionals in charge.

- The women staying in the shelter have experienced rejection, abandonment, and the indifference of the streets. To the anonymous shelter walls, they add goodwill, consideration, tolerance, and love. Bringing humanity into an institutional setting, **they are the ones who make this place into a "home" for each other.**

## "You are welcome here"

So often the world tempts us to put up walls so we don't see reality. I'm tempted too, but

I'd rather join Laurence in the harsh light where you can see the real world. I'd rather look at things through her eyes, see them clearly, and respond spontaneously in a way that does not deny the truth. **Quietly, Laurence is making a big difference.** In her world, people unsure of how to connect nevertheless dare to look each other in the eye and to say, "You are welcome here".

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[Read the Beijing Declaration on women's rights.](#)

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