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# FIZ MAGAZINE

● Advocacy and Support  
for Migrant Women and  
Victims of Trafficking



Human trafficking  
committed abroad

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## Dear Reader

“All human beings are equal before the law.” We have long been aware that this is not the case. We come across it every day in our work. And there is a specific inequality that is so disturbing that it is currently of great concern to us: Survivors of human trafficking who were not exploited in Switzerland but in another country are not entitled to receive financial assistance for protection and support from the state in Switzerland. In this magazine we show you what this means for our clients and for the work of FIZ. We ask: What would reality look like if it no longer made any difference where the exploitation took place, and if we were able to provide all survivors of human trafficking the protection and support that they so urgently require? In our conversation with lawyer and human trafficking expert Julia Planitzer, we talk about the discrepancy between mandatory international law and the reality in Switzerland. However, when it comes to crimes committed abroad, it is not only access to support but also international criminal prosecution which is a problem. We show who needs to cooperate in Switzerland and abroad for this to succeed. And we tell the story of a client who was exploited abroad and chose to press criminal charges in Switzerland. In the header “Insights”, we give you a glimpse behind the scenes of FIZ: what does everyday life in a shelter look like? And what is the “Strong with peers” project? FIZ has a vision: Survivors of human trafficking must be protected in Switzerland, also if the crime against them was committed abroad. We are confident that this aim is within reach thanks to our political and legal engagement.

Lelia Hunziker and Doro Winkler



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# The vision: protection and support for everyone

“An idea belongs to one person but a vision belongs to everyone.”<sup>1</sup> FIZ has a vision.

It is not based on wishful thinking that is far removed from reality.

This vision has a rock-solid foundation: human rights. They are a vital compass for us.

What if it didn't matter whether someone became a victim of human trafficking in Winterthur or Nice, in Gibraltar or in the United Arab Emirates? What if we could provide all trafficked persons the protection and support they so urgently need?

*Ding dong! The bell rings at the reception door of FIZ. “Do you have an appointment?” No answer. Nobody is to be seen on the video footage. The FIZ employee goes to answer the door but something is blocking it. Someone is lying there.*

*We prepare a sofa and bring a blanket and water to it. We heat up noodle soup. The woman lying at our door has to regain her strength first. We inform the supervisors in the shelter. The woman is allowed to rest first. She is not yet in a position to talk; that can wait until the next day. We open a file and a counselor carefully builds up trust with the woman. It turns out that she is Angolan and became a victim of human trafficking in Portugal and France. Somebody bought her a plane ticket to Zurich. The railway station assistance staff there sent her to us.*

*It is only very slowly that she is able to tell us what happened in Portugal and France. But that doesn't matter, she has enough time to do so. The canton of Zurich has granted her a short-term stay of three months. Her residence in the safe house of FIZ is financed during this period. Her stay can be extended by another three months if necessary.*

*After her initial stabilisation and after sessions with a trauma therapist as well as consultations with various doctors, she is doing much better. She wants to press charges against the perpetrators. The charges are filed and information about the perpetrators is passed to police in the relevant countries. The public prosecutor's office is on board, and ensures that inter-European police cooperation in this case can proceed in accordance with the law.*

Are you wondering where the vision is here? It begins quite banally at the moment we provide shelter for the victim and take care of her with no questions asked. Because in reality it is not like that. We must first clarify as quickly as possible whether the woman was exploited in Switzerland or abroad. Where do we take her if she was not exploited in Switzerland? Can we afford to take her in at our own expense? Because: Neither the official Victim Support nor hardly any other organisation in Switzerland finances assistance and protection if someone fell victim to human trafficking abroad.

If the crime was not committed in Switzerland, there is no support: this is the reality. And if the crime was perpetrated abroad, it is not legally straightforward to remain in Switzerland. Although human trafficking

is mostly a cross-border offence, criminal proceedings and cooperation with the authorities in a European (and especially in a non-European context) present very great challenges.

FIZ wants the vision to become a reality. Our goals are:

→ The state should provide the financial means to ensure that all potential victims of human trafficking have access to specialized accommodation, counseling, translation, material and medical emergency assistance - regardless of where they have been exploited. This is in line with the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, and is guaranteed by all other European states.

→ Switzerland should grant residence permits for potential victims of human trafficking during the investigation phase, regardless of where the crime was perpetrated.

→ The state should provide resources for international criminal proceedings to combat human trafficking in the long term.

Until this happens, we are guided by the above vision in our daily work.

<sup>1</sup>Quote by Erhard Blanck.

## Discussion

# No help for victims of a crime committed abroad – is that legal?

**Julia Planitzer has a doctorate in law and is co-editor of the first legal commentary on the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings. She spoke with Géraldine Merz, FIZ project manager. The conversation took place in July 2021.**

**Géraldine Merz:** A few weeks ago, Emina\* came to our door with her son. As it turned out in the first conversation, she is from Mongolia and became a victim of human trafficking in one of Switzerland's neighbouring countries. This was some time ago; there were criminal proceedings and she obtained residency status in that country as well as protection. A return to Mongolia was considered as extremely dangerous by the authorities there. Only: Although the country in question has support structures at least as good as those in Switzerland, Emina never felt safe there. The perpetrators tracked her down time and again, and the authorities decided that a witness protection programme was too expensive. She could no longer live with the constant danger and came to Switzerland with her son. What are Emina and her son entitled to here in Switzerland according to the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (CoE THB)?

**Julia Planitzer:** From my point of view, the Convention clearly states that every person has the right to specialist accommodation and counseling, translation,

emergency medical care, psychological and material assistance. Several points in the Convention mention the importance that states also recognize the identification of human trafficking victims reciprocally among themselves. Article 32 on international cooperation, for example, states that states must cooperate with one another in the support of victims as well as when acting on procedural matters.

For some of the support services, the Convention makes no distinction whether someone is a potential or an identified victim. The above-mentioned services should therefore be available to Emina and her son under any circumstances.

**Géraldine Merz:** It soon became clear to us that we would support them. And yet straight away there was this voice in the back of my head: no one will pay for their stay in our shelter, neither the cantonal victim support centre nor the social welfare office."

Article 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) that states must guarantee rights and freedoms to all persons under their jurisdiction. The explanatory notes to Art. 12 ECM state that the state in which the victim is located is responsible for the provision of support services. The United Nations supplementary Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (Palermo Protocol) also goes in this direction. It uses practically the same wording as the ECM. However, the major difference is that support in the Palermo Protocol is not an obligation but a recommendation. One of the major milestones of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Traf-

icking in Human Beings was that this is now no longer a recommendation, but an obligation.

**Géraldine Merz:** The reality in Switzerland is: There is no chance of any funding in such cases. And this despite the fact that we are seeing more and more people, especially from the asylum sector, where exactly these circumstances prevail. In the last two years more than 90 people who fell victim to human trafficking abroad were assigned to us. We can only counsel them on an "outpatient" basis thanks to a donation-supported project (see box). Last year we conducted a survey in our international network and asked whether organisations in other European countries are also struggling with this problem. It was fascinating that our colleagues abroad often did not understand the question: "What difference does it make whether someone was exploited abroad or not? We do not understand why you are asking that." How does this work in Austria?

**Julia Planitzer:** Yes, exactly. The majority of the states argued with work of this mandate. The counterpart to the Swiss Victim Assistance Act in Austria, the Victims of Crime Act VCA, does not regulate all support services, but only the state compensation for victims or therapy costs. In the past, the problem with the VCA was, that victims had to have legal residence in Austria at the time of the crime being committed, in order to have access to these services. This problem is not the same as it is today in Switzerland, but it is similar because the VCA also excluded many victims.

© Photo: Hörmandinger



## Julia Planitzer

Julia Planitzer holds a doctorate in law and is an expert in human rights with a focus on human trafficking, human rights and business, and women's rights. An Austrian national, she has been a member of the Council of Europe's expert body on trafficking in human beings, GRETA, since 2019. From 2008 to 2020 Planitzer was as a senior researcher at Vienna's Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Fundamental and Human Rights. She recently published the first comprehensive commentary on the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings together with Helmut Sax (A Commentary on the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, Elgar Commentaries, 2020). The commentary is also available free of charge at Elgar online ([www.elgaronline.com](http://www.elgaronline.com)). Julia Planitzer spoke to Géraldine Merz in her role as author and co-editor of the commentary.

**Géraldine Merz:** Does this mean that access to state compensation for victims used to be linked to the legality of residence in Austria?

**Julia Planitzer:** Exactly that. Victim protection was always guaranteed, regardless of where the crime was committed, but state compensation was not. Ger-

many was a pioneer in this respect and made an exception for victims of human trafficking. Later, the VCA in Austria was amended accordingly. An exception was introduced: Victims of trafficking no longer need legal residency in Austria in order to receive state compensation.

**Géraldine Merz:** Switzerland needs such a solution too. The funding of victim support services for victims of human trafficking must be ensured through channels other than the Victim Assistance Act. In a report on this topic within the framework of the Swiss National Action Plan to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings, the authors come to the same conclusion: in terms of appropriate and secure accommodation and counseling, as well as translation costs for victims of crimes committed abroad, Switzerland violates the CoE THB. The report proposes a quick and pragmatic solution. This is precisely

**Julia Planitzer:** In Switzerland, all support for victims of human trafficking is based on the Victim Assistance Act OHG. In Austria, support is regulated in a different way. The Austrian NGO Intervention Centre for Trafficked Women acts on behalf of the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Family Affairs, and the support for victims is financed within the frame-



what we have been doing for about three years in our project (see information box). But unfortunately this work is not (yet) funded by the state but through the help of generous donors.

**Julia Planitzer:** So it can be said that currently in Switzerland there is, so to speak, a “two-tier victim assistance” for victims of human trafficking? One for trafficked persons where the crime was committed in Switzerland, and another where the crime was committed abroad?

**Géraldine Merz:** Precisely. This is particularly evident in the area of asylum. When the crime was committed in Switzerland, we are put in contact with the victims by the police or other bodies. A period of 30 days is permitted for recovery and reflection. A short stay of three to six months is granted if the victim is willing to testify. During this time, victims can live in our shelters, regain their stability and recover. The costs for this are covered by Victim Assistance of the canton where the crime took place. However, if someone is in the asylum process and has become a victim of human trafficking abroad, they are not entitled to these benefits, and they are not put in touch with us by the authorities. If there is a suspicion of human trafficking, the State Secretariat for Migration SEM grants a recovery and reflection period of 30 days. An in-depth hearing on the

facts of the human trafficking is scheduled. Both, however, without ever having officially granted access to a specialized Victim Support Centre. In practice, this means highly traumatized persons are questioned by the SEM about the facts of human trafficking without any prior opportunity for stabilization or possibility for withdrawal. Most of the victims experience such questioning as highly re-traumatizing. Only after this in-depth questioning, which often lasts several hours, is a recovery and reflection period of 30 days granted. However, this remains ineffective for victims where the crime was perpetrated abroad, as they do not have access to the support services provided for this purpose. How do you see this? What does the Convention say about this approach?

**Julia Planitzer:** In principle, the Convention is very clear that in the context of being identified as a victim of human trafficking (Article 10), access to the above-mentioned support services such as safe accommodation and material and psychological assistance must be provided at the same time.

In this regard, there is an interesting ruling by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) against Austria. It distinguishes between the obligation of a state to provide victim protection and the obligation to initiate criminal prosecution. In the ruling, the ECtHR states that access

to victim protection must be guaranteed in all cases, including in the event of a crime committed abroad.

Victim protection services are vital for the recovery and reflection period, which is also a milestone of the European Council Convention. The basic idea of the recovery and reflection period is that it leads to a win-win situation for the situation of the victim and for law enforcement. A stable victim has a positive effect on the further course of the investigations and procedures. If no support is given during the recovery and reflection period, this contradicts what is stipulated in the CoE THB I believe.

# Complex criminal proceedings abroad

**The path from a criminal charge to the opening of proceedings is long. It must be proven that an offence was committed by an alleged perpetrator. This requires a fair trial with sufficient evidence. If the scene of the crime, the perpetrator or the evidence is based abroad and the victim is in Switzerland, the criminal proceedings are very complex.**

Every person has the right to file a criminal charge – even if the crime took place abroad. The question is what it takes for investigative and law enforcement authorities to take action. “Particularly in the case of human trafficking, it is difficult to obtain precise information about the crime scene or the identity of the perpetrator. Trafficked persons sometimes don’t know where they were located, not even in which country. Some only know the nicknames of the intermediaries or perpetrators,” says Zurich prosecutor Runa Meier.

The public prosecutor’s office only opens an investigation if the information provided by the police indicates sufficient suspicion and grounds to take action. The decision as to whether or not to open proceedings lies with the public prosecutor’s office. Also after opening of proceedings, they can be discontinued if investigations have not substantiated sufficient suspicion to press charges. Or they may be suspended until the statute of limitations expires, if it is assumed that the perpetrator will one day come to Switzerland, and an alert will be issued for their arrest up to that day. This means in effect, that no investigation will be ongoing for the time being. This may be very disappointing, especially for victims who wish to testify.

If the public prosecutor’s office open proceedings, they lead the investigation. “If the crime scene is abroad and the perpetrator is too, Switzerland is not respon-

sible for prosecuting the perpetrator,” says Runa Meier. However, if the alleged victim is able to provide information that allows identification, the public prosecutor’s office may request an investigation in the country concerned under the framework of mutual legal assistance. If the perpetrator is clearly identified, the public prosecutor can request to transfer the prosecution to the prosecuting authorities of the other country. Depending on the country, this is done by the Federal Office of Justice. Switzerland only makes a request to transfer prosecution if it is guaranteed that a fair trial can be carried out in the other country, and if some other preconditions are met. The other country may refuse to assume the criminal proceedings. Under certain circumstances, mutual legal assistance can be requested. This depends on what can realistically be expected from the mutual legal assistance proceedings. In certain countries, there are doubts as to whether the investigating authorities are in the position to provide international legal assistance and whether a result is to be expected. International mutual legal assistance is very important in human trafficking proceedings, since these crimes almost always have an international connection. However, it is not always promising, and this is frustrating for the victims. If victims cannot provide information that clearly identifies the perpetrator, the victim’s statements usually do not provide the law enforce-

ment authorities with sufficient material to investigate.

In international criminal proceedings many threads come together: The Federal Office of Police fedpol, assists in the establishment of contact between the responsible cantonal police and the police at the scene of the crime. “I can exchange information and cooperate with the police in country X. The basis for this is the police contract with the respective country. However, the evidence provided in this way is only valid for criminal proceedings once the public prosecutor’s office have processed them,” explains Daniel Oberholzer, Deputy Head of Structural Offences at Aargau Cantonal Police. The documents required as evidence must be obtained by the public prosecutor’s office via a request for mutual legal assistance.

“What would be vital for all countries is to have the infrastructure, resources and political stability to be able to conduct fair trials,” says Runa Meier. In order for the victim’s testimony to lead to concrete proceedings, it needs political will, the legal basis, the resources necessary for international cooperation, and committed prosecutors in all countries.

## Comprehensive protection for victims of human trafficking in the asylum sector

The project „Comprehensive Protection for Victims of Human Trafficking in the Asylum Sector“ enables FIZ to provide outpatient counselling to victims of human trafficking, also when the crime was committed abroad. The project is funded by the Reformed and Catholic regional churches of the Canton of Zurich and the Catholic City Association of Zurich.



<sup>2</sup> Ruling of the European Court of Human Rights, no. 58216/12, J. and others vs. Austria of 17 January 2017.

## Case Study

# Michelle wants to press charges

**Everything takes time and wounds heal eventually. Michelle has heard this phrase often. But it did not help her, because knowing that the men who did all this to her will not be punished and still walk around freely scares her and does not allow her wounds to heal.**

Michelle grew up in a small Ugandan village. They were four children and their father died early. The mother sold tomatoes at the market, but the income was not enough. Michelle had to drop out of school and go to work too. A young man she often saw at the market and who regularly offered her a cool drink, approached her one day. Michelle told him that she had to drop out of school to support her mother. The man also knew that one of Michelle's brothers was seriously ill. He said he knew a woman with good connections in Belgium, and that she could find a job for Michelle in a supermarket. Besides, she – Michelle – was very pretty, he said that the woman also had good contacts in the fashion industry and maybe Michelle could even work as a model or attend modelling school. The offer sounded tempting for Michelle, especially since the prospects in her country were not good and her mother urgently required money for the treatment of her sick brother. The acquaintance introduced Michelle to his contact, Lucie. She suggested that Michelle should first go to Moscow and attend modelling school, then later she could travel to Italy. Lucie organised the passport, visa and tickets. Michelle only had to go to the Russian embassy for an interview. Lucie accompanied her to the appointment. Michelle received a student visa and was happy.

At the airport in Moscow, she was picked up by a man who posed as Lucie's manager. He took Michelle to an accommodation and instructed her to enrol as a student in the school and to pay the school fees. He would come back to her in a few days. Some days later, he told her to travel by train to a small town. He would meet her there, and they would take some pictures.

On that day, Michelle's dream ended abruptly and an ordeal began that would last several years. The man picked her up and took her to a remote location. There were many women on the site, including Lucie. She was no longer nice at all, but told Michelle that from now on she had to work as a prostitute to repay the money Lucie had spent on her. Lucie estimated Michelle's debt at EUR 50,000. To break her will, she was first raped by several men.

The other women, who had been there for a long time, advised Michelle not to resist, but to drink a lot of alcohol so that she could forget everything. Lucie took Michelle's papers and mobile phone, searched her luggage, and gave Michelle some clothes to wear. Lucie told her to do what the men demanded and drink alcohol with them. Lucie took the money. Michelle spent a total of three years in Russia in the most adverse conditions and under the constant control of Lucie and the men who worked for Lucie. After this nightmare, Michelle was taken first to Belgium and later to Germany, near the border with Switzerland. Lucie was well connected, not only in Moscow, but also in European cities. Everything indicated that she was the boss. Michelle was also exploited in prostitution in Italy and Germany. Her worst experiences were in Germany, Michelle says. She had to work on the street there, and sometimes she was made to go away with clients. Early in the morning, the overseers would arrive and take Michelle back to the accommodation. Michelle was in a bad shape, also healthwise. She had several abortions, suffered from bleeding and abdominal pain. In addition, she had become accustomed to drinking alcohol and her body required it to numb the pain. After five years of suffering, Michelle managed to escape. A client felt sorry for her and took her to the nearest train station. He bought her a ticket to Basel, where, after entering the country, Michelle applied for asylum in Switzerland. The legal representative assigned to her finally put Michelle in touch with FIZ. Thanks to a donation-based project, FIZ was able to support Michelle even though she had been exploited abroad. When FIZ met Michelle, she was very weak, pregnant and deeply wounded. Her distrust was enormous, and even greater was the fear that Lucie would find her and take her back. For a long time, Michelle was unable to talk about what happened. During the conversations, she always looked at the floor, swaying her upper body restlessly, crying. Eye contact was impossible for her for a long time. With a great deal of patience, and, above all, thanks to the commitment of the legal representative and FIZ, it was finally possible for her to start trauma therapy. Besides her shame and despair, Michelle's anger at Lucie and the men is palpable. They appear again and again in her nightly nightmares. She wants these dreams to finally stop. Michelle wants to press charges in order to process the experience and leave it behind her.

She is convinced that she will only be able to do this if the perpetrators are held accountable and justice is done. This was also what her psychiatrist advised her to do. Michelle feels strong enough to speak to the court about the injustice, the horror, the fear and the injuries she has suffered. The FIZ counselor also thinks, Michelle is stable enough to press charges and to talk to other people about what she has experienced. For more than eight hours, Michelle was then questioned by a cantonal police officer who specialized in human trafficking, about the incidents in Russia, Italy and Germany. But Michelle does not know any names, neither Lucie's real name nor those of the men who work for Lucie. Nor can she name the exact locations where she was detained in Russia,

Italy and Germany. After the interrogation, the policewoman had to tell Michelle that, unfortunately, with so few details about the perpetrators and the locations of the crime, no criminal proceedings could be opened.

The negative decision caused Michelle to break down once again. She does not understand why the perpetrators go unpunished and why she has to continue living with the nightmares. Michelle still has a long way to go. She must find a way to over-

come and live with the deep suffering and the feeling of injustice. To be able to do this, she urgently needs the support of the trauma therapist and FIZ. However, both are only possible to a limited extent with Switzerland's current legal situation because there are limited state contributions available for support. If she at least had secure residency in Switzerland, she would feel safer and this would help her recover. However, the application for a residence permit is still pending.



# Maintaining endurance, empowerment and humour

**“Working as a counselor, no two days are the same,” says Kathrin Boller, coordinator for the care of those affected by human trafficking in the various FIZ shelters. In the following article, she tells us what makes her work so special and why the term victim does not fit her mission.**

I remember one resident of the shelters for victims of human trafficking particularly well: Alina\* did not talk to anyone during her first few months here. She was always alone in her room, cried almost continuously, and she was withdrawn and at the same time upset. She accused us of not taking good care of her. I found it very

difficult to endure this situation, because Alina's distress was so distinctive. But she resisted any form of support. However, after three months, she began to confide in me and others. Perhaps she could see for herself that she could be angry here and no one would become angry in response. While it seemed almost hopeless in such moments, in retrospect, it was important that we simply waited for her state of mind to change and remained patient. Today, Alina checks in regularly and asks how we are doing. She thanks us every time for what we did for her.

The work with victims of human trafficking is often intensive, problems are acute and immediate. It is not uncommon that one emergency leads to the next. When a woman is in a crisis situation and we go through it with her, as with Alina, this can be very difficult. But it leads to a bond and a feeling of trust. And the trust, I feel, is a gift.

Residents in the shelters remain responsible for themselves. They are the experts for their own lives. So, in my work, I don't perceive them as victims. They are – and

have to be – regarded as victims by the police, in court and in “victim” counseling, because this is based on the Victim Assistance Act. But it is important that

**“It is important to me that they do not simply see themselves as victims, as they are individuals with many resources and skills.”**

they do not only see themselves in this way. They are individuals with many resources and skills. My task as a counselor is to help them strengthen these resources and to support them so that they can stand up for themselves (again) and (re) gain control of their everyday life independently.

FIZ currently has six shelters for victims of human trafficking. The locations are secret. One shelter is home to particularly vulnerable women who require close care. Those who are more stable and independent are accommodated in safe apartments. There are few, but important rules that serve to ensure the safety of the clients and therefore must be implemented consistently. Other than that, the aim is for clients to have their personal freedom and be able to enjoy this. Almost every day, we offer activities: for example, a group picnic-excursion in the forest, planting new plants, or painting in the studio. With increasing independence, the daily structure consists of individual activities which promote social and professional integration.

A good dose of humour is elementary when working as a counselor. Whenever we can laugh together and with the residents, even about trivial things, everything becomes easier for a perhaps brief but important period. Amusing moments arise time and again, due to linguistic misunderstandings or communicating with hands and feet. This conveys an essential lightness. Body language creates closeness and trust – whether it is a smile, an open gesture or a hand on the shoulder.



## Shelters

**In the victim protection programme, FIZ offers shelter for victims of human trafficking. In particular, persons, who are in a dangerous situation are given a safe environment here, where they can come to rest and regain their stability. FIZ currently has shelters at six different locations. The addresses are kept secret for security reasons.**

# Strong with peers!

**The successful project “Strong with peers – sex workers inform other sex workers about effective protective measures against criminal acts and about counseling and support services available” is being transferred to a new form after three years. Reason enough to appreciate the highlights and findings so far.**

“When two people do the same thing, it's not the same.” The peer approach in social work makes use of this insight: “Peer” means “on a par and equal” and uses the connection that arises when people have a similar background of experience. In this case, it means it is not the same thing when sex workers are advised by social workers or by their peers, other sex workers. Thanks to this approach, it was possible to reach a completely new target group.

**“Working as a peer has given me the strength to deal with discrimination. Thanks to the group, I now feel pride instead of shame.”**

The main aim of the project was to reach out to new and young sex workers and to provide them with tips and strategies for safety. “Sometimes this is something as banal as not wearing a scarf, but also, clearly defining one's own limits and saying no to a client,” says Chantal Riedo, head of the project at FIZ, summing up the content of the peer-to-peer discussions. “It was also very important for peers to pass on their experiences and say: I received support from FIZ or from another organisation when I needed it,” says Chantal. “During the coronavirus pandemic, the bridge that the peers had built with sex workers was all the more important. During this period, the contact between them even intensified. Due to the work ban in Switzerland, completely new questions and challenges arose: Where can I find support? What am I still allowed to do, and what not?”

The peer approach requires a high level of resources. “Training workshops and regular meetings with the peer workers to reflect on their own role and competencies, as well as to exchange experiences, were crucial. These measures not only served to ensure quality, but also created space for self-empower-

ment and empowerment of the four peer workers,” says Chantal. The fact that the peer workers have also gained a great deal of benefit from this project for themselves is made clear by their statements at the final workshop: “My work as a peer worker has enabled me to engage with my profession and to reflect on it more.” Or: “While previously the focus was primarily on selling sex, now there is a family feeling towards other sex workers and less coldness.” And: “Working as a peer helped me deal with discrimination. Thanks to the group, I now feel pride instead of shame.”

The project has been also worthwhile for FIZ. “The project has enabled us to gain more credibility and a different approach among sex workers. In addition, we were able to learn a lot about sex work from conversations and discussions with the peer workers, and we found out more about the wishes and problems of sex workers,” concluded the FIZ advisors.

**“The project has enabled us to gain more credibility and a different approach among sex workers.”**

In the meantime, word-of-mouth is working so well that additional resources are needed to cover all the requests. Thus, an important goal of the project has been achieved. Instead of the “Strong with peers” project, the “Sex work experts talk” project is now coming into effect. Meetings between peers and counsellors on topics that concern sex workers will continue. “And who knows,” says Chantal Riedo, “perhaps this will result in a new, larger project in the future.”

\* Name changed

“FIZ helps every victim to overcome the crisis they are facing. FIZ staff listen to every victim’s story and offer hope to help them overcome the challenges of life. I hope you will continue your commitment because there are many more women like me who can be helped.”

F. G., supported for several years by FIZ protection program for victims of trafficking

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