

## Human Rights also apply to Sex Work

Cologne, Vienna, 6<sup>th</sup> July 2010. Although sex work takes place all over Europe, it is not uniformly regulated. Restrictive legislation in some countries leads to sex workers working illegally or in legal gray zones. People working in this sector are disadvantaged and stigmatized because sex work is not always officially accepted as employment. Because of this situation, human rights violations occur again and again. Such violations will also be a theme at the International AIDS Conference that starts on 18<sup>th</sup> July in Vienna.

The legally difficult terms of employment are at least partially responsible for sex work being a risk for those who offer sexual services. "In Austria, for example, the commercial exploitation of women who offer sexual services is promoted by the actual legislation," says Eva van Rahden, director of the Vienna Project Sophie. Even though sex work has not been punishable since 1974, it is still subject to numerous other legal limitations. "Regretfully, insecurity and a legal gray zone are part of the work reality and way of life for sex workers," says van Rhaden. Project Sophie, is dedicated to educating sex workers; as a project of Volkshilfe Wien, it is well-placed to inform the women on legislation and taxation.

While sex work is considered immoral but not illegal in Austria, it is sex workers' clients who are criminalized in Sweden, where those who pay for sexual services may be punished with fines or detention. As a result, however, even the women who offer sexual services are pushed into the underground. "Comparatively speaking, Germany has modern laws that regulate sex work", says Harriet Langanke of the Charitable Foundation Sexuality and Health (GSSG). Since 2002 the so called Prostitution Legislation has been in force in Germany. "The legislation is an important first step to fully recognizing sex work in social and employment legal matters", says Langanke. The GSSG is dedicated to the Rights of People in sex work and cooperates with national and international organizations. "If sex work takes place in the criminal realm, then payment for the rendered services cannot be sued for. To initiate legal procedures in the case of violent abuse is also very difficult in this case."

Access to health services as well as the autonomy of people in sex work is not guaranteed in many countries. In Austria, sex workers are obliged to undergo a health check on a weekly basis. "The examinations often are carried out without respect to dignity. They also create a misleading sense of security," says Langanke. "Some pathogens, like HIV, are more easily transmitted at a time when they still don't show up in a regular test. Proper counseling and a secure legal framework would be much more effective."

On the occasion of the International AIDS Conference in Vienna, Sophie and GSSG will be pointing out the extremely difficult situation of sex workers, who are confronted with a positive test result. During the conference from 18 to 23 July, male and female sex workers from all over the world can connect with one another and join together to stand up for their rights. This could be an important step forward in asserting their recognition across Europe.

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