



More about the LEFÖ-history

Historical Background

In the late 1970s and early 1980s many refugees from Latin American countries ruled by military dictatorships came to Western Europe, and also to Austria. Latin American women living in Austria as political refugees founded LEFÖ in 1985 to provide assistance for other women from these countries living in exile, to offer support in dealing with traumatic experiences, counseling, support language courses and a place for consciousness raising groups to meet. We also sought to prevent retraumatization triggered by racism, xenophobia, sexism and eurocentrism in the “host country.” The work was extremely necessary at the time, because there were no specific measures or support frameworks for women subjected to grave human rights violations.

Migrant women from Latin American

A main focus at LEFÖ still today is working with Latin American migrant women and their families.

Although our early work specifically focused on women refugees, by the end of the 1980s our target group had changed significantly. Neoliberal policies in Latin American countries, economic adjustment policies and the simultaneous privatization of previously publicly run institutions resulted in a new wave of migration. Those facing poverty (even the middle class) and particularly women, who felt the weight of responsibility to care for their families, began to immigrate to other places including Western Europe. In response to this trend, LEFÖ adapted and expanded its counseling and educational programs to meet the needs of a broader spectrum of migrant women.

Over the years, our experience has shown that almost all of the problems these women face can be traced back to the extremely restrictive legal situation. This includes dependencies that arise from having one’s legal status bound to another family member,

husband, friend, employer etc. The current legislation does not provide a situation in which migrant women can be independent.

Migrant women in Sex Work

The massive **flows of migration from Central and Eastern Europe** as well as the internal flow of migration from Eastern Europe to Central Europe have brought about major transformations in the prostitution scene. In terms of mobility among sex workers, Central European countries have become more important as they are now simultaneously target, transit countries and countries of origin.

Working with migrant women in a field that is not only delicate but also difficult to access requires methods that provide the women access and support. In cooperation with other partner organizations within the TAMPEP network (Transnational AIDS/STD Prevention among Migrant Prostitutes in Europe/Project) LEFÖ developed the **concept of cultural mediation**. This approach seeks to create a space where women are not instrumentalized and their rights as women, migrants and sex workers are acknowledged and respected.

Cultural mediation is a social, cultural and linguistic form of mediation and is also a means for doing HIV and STD prevention work. Cultural medication aims to provide migrant women with access to medical institutions / health offices and other social institutions and to mediate between the two. These approaches seek to empower sex workers and improve their living and working conditions.

LEFÖ put this expertise in cultural mediation and the successful education concept for migrant women to use within the framework of the Equal project SILA – Counseling Center for Prostitutes (2003-2005).

Women affected by trafficking

As mentioned above, specific factors have contributed to the massive rise in trafficking in women over the past 20 years. LEFÖ has also been confronted with these changes and sought to find a way to provide support for victims of these grave violations of human and women's rights. In the early 1990s, together with other women's

organizations in Western Europe, LEFÖ began to engage with the issue of trafficking in women.

Following a two-year preparation phase (including a working group involving a cross-section of several ministries) LEFÖ opened the Center for Women Affected by Trafficking (IBF Interventionsstelle für Betroffene von Frauenhandel). Today, the **LEFÖ/IBF Center is still the first and only victim protection center for women affected by trafficking in Austria.** We not only offer women comprehensive counseling, but also assisted living programs and anonymous crisis housing. Our aim is to ensure the protection of these women's human rights and to advocate for compensation for victims of international crimes.

In addition to our direct work with the women and to our political and advocacy work, we also offer special training programs for NGOs, legislative and executive staff in Austria and in Southeastern Europe.

National and international public relations, networking and lobbying

Due to the internationalization of sex work and the international character of trafficking in women LEFÖ has built up an **effective international network** over many years. On the one hand, we aim to increase the protection of the women and, on the other hand, to advocate for the implementation of these women's rights on a European level. In doing so, national and international networking in a number of areas remains crucial to our work. This includes taking part in networks concerned with feminism, women's migration, sex work, trafficking in women, illegalized women and women's rights.

By placing specific **focuses in our media and public relations work** we seek to raise awareness and sensitize authorities, the media and society at large. LEFÖ focuses specifically on migrant women's rights and the reasons for women to within a so-called globalized world and refuses sex-and-crime sensationalism or voyeuristic styles of reporting.

LEFÖ places an emphasis on active participation, empowerment and on the self-organization of migrant women. At LEFÖ we work to advocate for the rights of migrant women, to empower and encourage them to lobby for and demand their rights themselves.