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Women in Prostitution and social responsibility

Prostitution is an international phenomenon that has been a topic of social work since its beginnings as a profession. In the European Union prostitution and trafficking of women is being widely and controversially discussed, positions ranging from 'a normal women's job' to 'violence against women' and from a differentiation between prostitution and forced prostitution to a rejection of this differentiation. Professional social work institutions find themselves between the needs of very different groups of women in prostitution, numerous laws and state procedures and the powerful network of economic beneficiaries. That makes it necessary to develop a position on prostitution that makes it possible to reach out for the women and to find a way through the different systems supporting and fighting prostitution.

In the paper an overview on the situation of women in prostitution in Western Europe will be given, many of them coming from Middle and Eastern Europe, taking the situation in Germany as an example: Looking into the diversification of work and life situations, health problems and experiences with violence. Then qualitative research results on the possibilities to get hold of women in need by social work institutions, their professional positions and methods as well as their cooperating partners (police or milieu) will be discussed.

Important issues that have to be taken into account are – apart from the general heterogeneity of the social phenomenon of prostitution – the fast changes concerning working conditions and main countries of migration and the growing variety of sexual services on the background of changing demands of customers. That leads to a necessary enquiry of the following dimensions:

- Legal versus illegal,
- The decision making possibilities of the women in prostitution concerning their offers respectively their dependence on demands and the sex market,
- Choice versus force.

These differentiations play an important role for professionals in social work and their chances and limitations in working with women in prostitution and for a political position on prostitution in social work as a necessary base for this work.