



# **WHAT'S REALLY HAPPENING IN SWITZERLAND?**

*A Case Study in Regulated Prostitution*

**Note:** Unless otherwise stated, all translations are from Google translate. All emphases are added.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Switzerland's "harm reduction" approach to prostitution represents a systemic failure that enables exploitation while enriching NGOs:

- The government spends millions on ineffective programs.
- NGOs receive substantial funding, with funds overwhelmingly going to personnel costs.
- Harm reduction NGOs actively oppose real solutions and demand control of any new funding.
- Despite Swiss courts ruling consent to prostitution is impossible under economic or social hardship, 92% of women in prostitution are migrants, many facing economic coercion.
- Almost 50% of brothels evade mandatory health inspections.
- On average, successful inspections result in meeting with only one or two people.
- Police interviews fail to detect victims as traffickers coach victims, who do not expect their later exploitation.
- Language barriers lead to third parties negotiating sex acts with buyers.
- Inspections and outreach visits reveal shocking conditions:
  - "Very young," pregnant migrants supervised by "capos".
  - Women with sleep disorders due to being kept awake 24/7 for sex buyers on demand.
  - Unsafe, unventilated facilities.
- In 2022, 66% of convicted traffickers receive fully suspended sentences or sentences of less than one year.
- Police no longer check brothels for signs of human trafficking because victims - who fear retaliation from pimps and traffickers - rarely cooperate.
- Police sometimes charge abusive brothel operators with regulatory violations with which they do not need victim cooperation.
- 28% of brothels in one district of Geneva were closed in 2022 due to regulatory violations and "unscrupulous" practices.
- Rather than receiving support and shelter when brothels were closed, many women who lived in the brothels were suddenly homeless.
- 100 sex trafficking victims are identified annually at the "successful" sex box project, yet many remain trapped in exploitation due to the inaction of officials.
- After mounting pressure to introduce exit services, new exit services in Zurich are being run by an NGO that supports full decriminalization of prostitution and claims the goal of the project is not to help women exit prostitution – but destigmatize prostitution.
- The state has remained steadfast in their decision to maintain a legal system due to claims that prohibition will drive the sex trade "underground" and increase violence, despite admitting this has never occurred elsewhere and that organized crime has overrun the legal sex trade in other countries with legal prostitution.
- During COVID lockdowns, when prostitution was banned, there was no reduction in victim referrals, identification, or assistance and no increase in violence against women in prostitution.

## INTRODUCTION: THE SWISS PARADOX

In theory, regulation of prostitution should work. Many believe, if an activity cannot be eliminated, the logical solution would be to implement strict oversight to ensure safety and dignity. Switzerland, with arguably the world's most comprehensive regulatory system, should represent the best possible version of this approach.

Yet the Swiss model reveals a fundamental paradox – despite implementing seemingly foolproof measures - police interviews, health inspections, designated supervised facilities, extensive outreach programs - each regulatory approach has failed in practice.

Why?

Legalization explodes demand; Increased demand drives human trafficking to meet it; Economic pressure eliminates any safety measures; Fear silences trafficking victims; Political will evaporates once exploitation is normalized.

This system has created a network of beneficiaries invested in maintaining the status quo. Harm reduction NGOs receive substantial funding for ineffective programs, the economy benefits from a thriving sex industry, and men's "right to sex" is protected - while the most vulnerable are exploited in plain sight.

This paper examines how Switzerland's harm reduction approach, despite its comprehensive regulations, has produced a system that serves everyone except the women it claims to protect.

## THE REALITY BEYOND THE REGULATIONS

Prostitution has been formally legal in Switzerland since 1942. Switzerland employs a harm reduction approach to prostitution – they assert prostitution is a "social reality" (Federal Office for Migration: Expert group, 2014) and focus on minimizing the negative impacts of prostitution through canton-specific<sup>1</sup> regulations, while seeking to continue a legal prostitution system. Government harm reduction strategies range from funding organizations that distribute condoms and lubricant, to more unusual practices, such as funding commercial sex websites and "sex boxes" (City of Zürich Sozialdepartement, 2018a).

Switzerland is a small country of about 9 million people. It is estimated that one out of every five men in Switzerland purchases sex at least once a year (APiS, 2014), contributing to a CHF<sup>2</sup> 3.2 billion prostitution industry in the country annually (Biberstein, L., & Killias, M., 2015), and that in 2005, there were 2.8 million transactional sex encounters in the city of Zurich alone (Rössler, W et al., 2010). Switzerland's sex trade is "constantly increasing" (Meystre-Agostoni M, et al., 2008, p.63).

<sup>1</sup> A canton is a state/province in Switzerland. Switzerland is made up of 26 cantons.

<sup>2</sup> Swiss Franc. Currently, one Swiss Franc is 1.21 USD and 0.94 British Pound.

In 2015, over 1,000 brothels were registered within Switzerland's borders (Biberstein, L., & Killias, M., 2015), and an estimated 13,000-22,000 women were in prostitution (Federal Council, 2015) - predominantly migrant women from former Soviet countries "forced to find survival solutions..." (Meystre-Agostoni M, et al., 2008).

Despite repeated calls by international authorities, including the US Department of State (US State Department, 2022), to reduce the demand for prostitution, the Swiss National Council overwhelmingly voted against the criminalization of the purchase of sex on June, 8, 2022 with 172 opposed vs. 11 in favor (End Demand Switzerland, 2022, originally from, Swiss Parliament, 2020).

The government has implemented no other policy to reduce the demand for commercial sexual exploitation, as required by international law. According to the Swiss Federal Council:<sup>3</sup>

*"Prostitution is not a profession like any other: Anyone who engages in prostitution in Switzerland has an increased risk of suffering damage to their health and becoming a victim of criminal offences."* (Swiss Federal Council, 2015, p. 98)

A 2017 survey of 579 people selling sex revealed shocking statistics: 92% were foreign nationals with only 3.6% reporting they chose prostitution because they wanted to (Lociciro S, et al., 2017, p. 10, 47). The vast majority cited financial desperation for engaging in prostitution - supporting family (56.3%), basic needs (29.9%), or debt (24.7%).

## THE NGO INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

### HOW HIV PREVENTION BECAME A FUNDING GATEWAY

In the 1980s HIV/AIDS concerns helped many harm reduction organizations secure state funding. But as HIV rates remained consistently low, these groups faced a challenge: HIV prevention alone couldn't justify their continued funding and they continuously broadened their mission scope:

*"...it is the problem of HIV/AIDS which allowed the [harm reduction] associations created in the 1980s and early 1990s to be institutionalized and to receive state financial support. However, **HIV/AIDS was not enough to guarantee their long-term survival.** Other problems had to be added to that of HIV/AIDS, since the 1990s, **for action in the prostitution environment to be perceived by the authorities as necessary:** change in the Penal Code which no longer condemns male prostitution, but also the **bilateral agreements which led to the arrival of migrant sex workers with various residence statuses, finally diversification of the places of exercise...**"*

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<sup>3</sup> Note: "The Federal Council is the highest executive authority in the country. It comprises seven members, who are elected by the Federal Assembly. The Federal Council's tasks are set out in the Federal Constitution". (Federal Council, n.d.)

*"These changes have broadened the issues linked to the sex market, also **diversifying the forms of vulnerability** and consequently the support to be provided to these people. Thus, clandestine sex workers, cabaret dancers, transgender sex workers and even issues of assistance to victims of trafficking are all themes covered by specialized associations. This diversification has **complicated access to this population** and requires that associations acquire additional skills and knowledge about these populations to have access to them."* (Bugnon, G., Chimienti, M., & Chiquet, L., with Eberhard, J., 2009, p. 72).

## POLITICAL ENTRENCHMENT

However, in Geneva, it was not only the "diversification of vulnerability" that resulted in increased funding – but politics. Financing for HIV harm reduction services for women selling sex in Geneva has increased over time, despite studies showing extremely low HIV rates among women in the sex industry, a 2020 study concluding that *"HIV and HCV do not appear to pose a major public health problem among FSWs ["female sex workers"] in Switzerland"* (Vernazza et al., 2020), and experts at the University of Geneva questioning the need for the government to fund aggressive prevention programs (Neuenschwander, et al., 2005, p. 91).

*"The funds made available [in Geneva] have continued to increase in recent years... The fact that there have not yet been any cuts in the prevention budget is also due to the fact that the various NGOs are very well anchored in Geneva's political system and can count on great political support there."* (Neuenschwander, et al., 2005, p. 47)

## THE OUTSIZED INFLUENCE OF NGOs ON POLICY

The Swiss policy landscape is dominated by harm reduction NGOs who claim to speak for "sex workers" (ProCore, 2021a), and wield disproportionate influence on policy through both direct advocacy and academic research.

A 2015 Federal Council assessment of the prostitution industry concluded that banning the purchase of sex would prevent women from receiving HIV prevention material, citing research (Bugnon, G., Chimienti, M., & Chiquet, L., with Eberhard, J., 2009) claiming 80% of women in prostitution faced HIV "risks." This data came not from epidemiological studies, but from a survey on the *perceived risks* in the sex industry from representatives from the very NGOs who receive millions of Swiss francs in government funding for HIV prevention services.

However, according to the Swiss Federal Office of Public Health, despite a theoretical increased *risk* of HIV exposure, there has never been an observed elevated *prevalence* of HIV among females in the Swiss sex industry (Bundesamt für Gesundheit, 2010), nor is the HIV prevalence lower than in European countries without extensive harm reduction programs, such as Moldova and Lithuania (Vu, F., Cavassini, et al., 2020; Vernazza et al, 2020, Platt et al.

2015. p. 299). In fact, In 2022, only *three* females and seven males had contracted HIV through selling or buying sex, respectively. Infection primarily occurred in foreign, high prevalence, countries, either in migrant women's country of origin or through sex tourism (Federal Office of Public Health, 2022, p. 21).

Researchers studying violence against women selling sex during COVID lockdowns admitted they *"designed the questionnaire in accordance with the NGO's orientations..."* and referred to the NGO as *"the gatekeeper of this research..."* (Molnar and Ros, 2022). A similar Zurich University of Applied Sciences (ZHAW) School of Social Work report on the impact of COVID lockdowns on violence in the sex trade, which concluded that criminalization increases harm, relied on 12 interviews with subjects hand-picked by the harm reduction NGOs themselves.

Interviewees included individuals who didn't work during the lockdown period (Brüesch, et al., 2021, p. 22), and some others, while self-identifying as "sex workers," didn't actually sell sex, but had other occupations (such as beauticians) and were dominatrixes on the side (Brüesch, et al., 2021, p. 26).

This is a systemic problem. Harm reduction NGOs routinely select study participants who do not represent the marginalized women who make up the vast majority in the sex trade, influence questionnaires and study design, and then use the resulting research to lobby against the criminalization of prostitution. This is a phenomenon previously seen in New Zealand (Smith, J., 2023a).

ProCore, a network of 28 Swiss NGOs that support full decriminalization of prostitution, for example, cited the very ZHAW study they helped inform as evidence to the UN Special Rapporteur of Violence Against Women of the harms of criminalizing the purchase of sex (ProCore, 2024a). Moreover, another harm reduction NGO who was involved in the research project cited the study in their annual reports as evidence of the deterioration of working conditions under a ban on commercial sex (Solidaria Zurich, 2021, p. 11). But the connection between harm reduction NGOs and the researchers whose work supports their lobbying efforts goes even deeper.

A series of federally-funded publications<sup>4</sup> on the sex market in Switzerland, which were the *"main sources of information used to describe the current situation in Switzerland..."* (Federal Council, 2015, p. 9) in the Federal Council's 2015 decision to reject the Nordic Model and maintain a legalized and commercialized prostitution system, were co-authored by two Swiss **academics who were on the advisory committee of the harm reduction NGO, Aspasie** (Aspasie, 2007, p.7; Aspasie, 2023, p. 4). By 2019, **one of these academics was the president** (Aspasie, 2020, p. 6) of a different harm reduction NGO, *Boulevards*, in addition to maintaining her previous role as an Aspasie committee member (Aspasie, 2019, p. 3).

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<sup>4</sup> Földhàzi, A., & Chimienti, M., 2007; Bugnon, G., & Chimienti, M., with Chiquet, L., 2009a; Bugnon, G., & Chimienti, M., with Chiquet, L., 2009b; Bugnon, G., Chimienti, M., & Chiquet, L., 2009a ; Bugnon, G., & Chimienti, M., with Chiquet, L., 2009b; Bugnon, G., Chimienti, M., & Chiquet, L., with Eberhard, J., 2009

In their paper, *The Sex Market and Violence in Geneva* (2007), the authors claim that most study participants – who were primarily recruited by their organization, Aspasie (Földhàzi, A., & Chimienti, M., 2007, p. 121) – believed that:

*“Aspasie is the most suitable organization to lead a campaign to prevent violence in the prostitution space. Thus, most of the proposed measures are considered to be the responsibility of Aspasie.”*

The author's final recommendation was that the ambitious goal of reducing violence in the sex trade can be achieved by “empowering” women – through the distribution of educational pamphlets (Földhàzi, A., & Chimienti, M., 2007, p. 97). They also claim that lobbying for the legitimacy of prostitution is essential to reduce violence.

***“It goes without saying that the implementation of these measures can only be done if additional funding for the association's [Aspasie] current activities is found.”*** (Földhàzi, A., & Chimienti, M., 2007)

In the reports, researchers thank Aspasie for their advice and expertise, while omitting their own relationship as committee members. However, in her *gender studies* PhD thesis, published three years later, one of the authors provides more insight:

*“During the workshop period, I joined the committee of Aspasie, a solidarity association defending the rights of sex workers. I am the association's representative on working groups dealing with trafficking in women, notably the one organized by the Office des droits humains of the Canton of Geneva. This activist status, combined with my experience as a researcher, enabled me to discover new issues that would otherwise be invisible. In this way, my expertise was enhanced and the results of my work complemented.”* (Földhàzi, A., 2010, p. 15)

After thanking three different authors of the series of publications by name, the Aspasie 2007 Annual report claims:

***“...We are pleased to benefit from a committed and supportive movement of researchers. This is invaluable support in helping us play our role as intermediaries between the silences of “invisible” people... and the more or less relevant discourses of the media, as well as of political, administrative, and legal institutions regarding them.”***<sup>5</sup>

According to the University of Geneva (2023), where the authors were affiliated, relationships between “the academic world and the local community...for example as **members of a foundation board or a board of directors...**” can bring many benefits.

*“However, these interactions can create conflicts of interest between the third-party entity and the University or between a staff member and the University. Such situations can be harmful to the University, particularly in terms of its reputation. As such, it is important for the University to be able to identify these situations.”*

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<sup>5</sup> DeepL translation

The University of Geneva mandates researchers involved with third-parties declare their roles with and seek authorization from the University to ensure compatibility with the staff member's duties (University of Geneva, 2023). Additionally, the University of Geneva Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct mandates that any situations that could indicate conflict of interest, whether moral or financial, must be declared (University of Geneva, 2019).

We have no way of knowing what, if anything, was disclosed privately to the University or to the Federal Council. However, since the authors did not publicly declare their roles on Aspasie's committee in the reports – despite co-authoring work that directly benefited their organization – it remains unclear whether policymakers were aware of this conflict of interest when relying on these studies as their “main sources of information” (Federal Council, 2015, p. 9) in their federal prostitution policy. What is clear, is that the Federal Council attempted to present the research only as authoritative, academic evidence.

These apparent conflicts of interest in sex industry research and policy evaluations, are not restricted to Switzerland. Academics who would perform the baseline and follow-up assessment of the Nordic Model<sup>6</sup> in Northern Ireland included numerous researchers who had signed petitions and submitted written opposition to the Nordic Model in both Northern Ireland<sup>7</sup> and Scotland (Smith, J., 2023b). All five members of the project's 2019 advisory group, which consisted primarily of NGOs, had either submitted written public opposition to the Nordic Model or “campaigned against” it (see Smith, J., 2023b, p. 3-4) for years. The researchers concluded the Nordic Model increased violence and was ineffective – claims which have been debunked (Smith, J., 2023b).

In New Zealand, the review of full decriminalization of prostitution was conducted by a committee that included an NGO that receives \$1 million annually for harm reduction services in the legal sex industry (Smith, J., 2023a, p.12) and that was instrumental in the enactment of the very law they were to review. The committee also included former brothel-keepers and researchers who had, like Swiss researchers, previously admitted changing their methods in accordance with harm reduction NGO preferences. Unsurprisingly, the committee claimed full decriminalization was a great success and increased the human rights and dignity of women – claims that have also been debunked (Smith, J., 2023a).

While these Swiss NGOs claim to advocate for “sex workers” interests, an “expert council,” consisting primarily of harm reduction NGOs that now support the full decriminalization of prostitution have **successfully recommended against criminalizing men who knowingly purchase trafficking victims for sex** and against mandating installing alarm buttons in brothels (Federal Office for Migration: Expert group, 2014, p. 37). When the Swiss Federal Council sought guidance from the same expert council on how to stop violence in prostitution, they claimed “that stigmatisation is usually a bigger problem than violence...” and that it is stigmatization that “makes them [‘sex workers’] ill” (Federal Council, 2015, p. 54).

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<sup>6</sup> The Nordic Model is a framework where sex selling is legalized, while sex buying, and pimping is criminalized. Additionally, public funding is distributed to provide exit services and support for women in the sex trade.

<sup>7</sup> Northern Ireland passed the Nordic Model in 2015 under Article 64A in the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Criminal Justice and Support for Victims Act.

ProCore, the network of 28 harm reduction NGOs, even questioned, why do “sex workers” need to love their work?

*“In a fairer world, there would be fewer people selling sex to survive. But if a woman sells sex because she is poor or has no papers and therefore cannot find legal work, it does not make her any less poor if she is deprived of the opportunity to do sex work. The majority of people work to secure their existence and not to fulfill their own potential. How voluntarily does a factory worker work on an assembly line or a sewer cleaner work underground?”*

*Our economic system generally does not give us free choice, but produces many constraints. But why are sex workers in particular required to love their work and have fun doing it? It would be much more important that they can do their work safely and without stigmatization, criminalization and discrimination...” (ProCore 2023a, p.6)*

While claiming to support women who want to leave the industry, they argued that prostitution offers “financial advantages,” is a “suitable career for many,” (ProCore 2024b) and demanded that any potential services (and of course, funding) must be run exclusively through existing NGOs with “cantonal funds,” and rejected volunteer-based programs as “saving money in the wrong place.”

## FAILED “SOLUTIONS”: A PATTERN OF ABSURDITY

The following are examples of some of the numerous ineffective campaigns the Swiss government has funded in a futile attempt to reduce harm in the sex trade:

### SELF-DEFENSE CAMPAIGN

After an observed increase in sex buyer violence, the harm reduction NGO, Lysistrada, received a CHF 39,400.00 contract from the Federal Police in 2021 to implement a violence prevention program. The first part of the project consisted of the employees of the harm reduction organization taking a two-day Wen-do class and “pass[ing] on the knowledge to sex workers” (Lysistrada, 2022a), apparently by distributing fliers.

The flier advises that when women are being strangled by their clients, they should “grab, squeeze, and hit the testicles...hit the testicles with the knee... then throw the customer off and flee” (Lysistrada, 2022b). If women selling sex are being shoved down forcefully during oral sex, they are advised they can additionally “bite the testicles” (Lysistrada, 2022b). The employees subsequently took a course on preventing and reacting to crimes (Lysistrada, 2022a, p. 9).

Of course, the best course of action is to not need self defense in the first place, which is why elsewhere, they give (bizarre) de-escalation techniques, such as suggesting women

should “fake an epileptic seizure” or “start singing” to prevent their clients from assaulting them (Lysistrada, n.d.).

## “RESPECT” CAMPAIGN

The harm reduction organization Zonaprotetta successfully received a grant of CHF 29,896.00 in 2021 from Swiss Federal Police for the RISPETTO project, which “aims to promote a culture of respect and responsibility in sex work in order to prevent and counteract forms of violence and exploitation” (Zonaprotetta, 2021).

To counteract violence, they made pamphlets with the words, “respect,” “respect privacy” and “stick to the agreements made.” The cards have a voucher for a free HIV and syphilis test on the back.

There are two videos (less than 1 minute) for the campaign on their website, one that shows images of the cards, with the text: “respect” and “thank you,” to the tune of Aretha Franklin’s “Respect” (Zonaprotetta, 2021). Another campaign video warns buyers that women selling sex are faced with violence, and criminalization of prostitution is the cause (Zonaprotetta, 2021).

Other harm reduction NGOs have similarly attributed violence to “stigmatization” (ProCore. (2021). This position has even been espoused on official government websites, such as the website of St. Gallon Canton, which states, “*The greater the acceptance of sex work in society, the more security sex workers have in doing their job*” (St. Gallen Canton, n.d.). This leads one to wonder, if it is criminalization that is the cause of violence – and not sex buyers, why do they need this campaign in Switzerland, which has legalized prostitution and decriminalized pimping for almost 83 years?

There has been no quantitative evaluation of the effects of these campaigns and it's unclear why the Swiss government continues to supply hundreds of thousands of Swiss francs to fund mass pamphlet distribution in brothels, which seems both ineffective and often outright childish<sup>8</sup>. However, two recent murders of women selling sex by sex buyer's demonstrates the ongoing risks of prostitution in Switzerland (Sennhauser, F., 2023; Sex Industry Kills, n.d.).

## DON JUAN

The Federal Office of Public Health (OFSP) has made sex buyers a target for HIV prevention efforts since at least 2007 (Balthasar H, Dubois-Arber F, 2007. p. 5). The Don Juan project was founded in 1999 to provide outreach and education about safe sex to sex buyers (Balthasar H, Dubois-Arber F, 2007, p. 30).

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<sup>8</sup> For instance, in one federally-funded project, NGOs distributed “super client” pamphlets to sex buyers to encourage good behavior. “*To avoid stigmatising the clients, the logo of this flyer is Superman next to Wonder Woman, a DC Comics superhero who is well-known for his courage and ethical irreproachability.*” They claimed “*Although some persons were very interested in the campaign, others seemed to be uncomfortable when receiving the flyer...the impact of this campaign is unclear...*” (Molnar, L., & Pongelli, S., 2019). They claim that due to “ethical principles” it is *impossible* to evaluate the effects of such projects.

A 2012 study confirms the low HIV prevalence among sex buyers in Switzerland. Researchers tested buyers in the red light district of Lausanne for HIV for five nights in 2008, 2009, and 2010. Of the men in the samples, 40–60% were either married or in a committed relationship (Darling KE, et al., 2012). Out of 109 HIV tests conducted across all study periods, *not one sex buyer was HIV positive* (Darling KE, et al., 2012).

Outreach workers claimed that knowledge of HIV is already “well established” among sex buyers but that buyers are not very concerned about HIV due to the emergence of antiretroviral therapy (ART), which according to public health officials, when taken consistently can result in the virus being both undetectable and non transmissible (CDC, 2024).

Despite the program apparently not preventing the common practice of sex buyers removing their condoms (Lociciro S, et al., 2017), sex buyer violence (Rössler, W et al., 2010) and demands for unprotected sex (LISA Association, 2022, City of Zurich, 2018a), sex buyers reportedly argue that there was a “*need to lift taboos around paid sex...*” and “*prostitution clients find in the Don Juan action a space where they can freely express their condition as clients*” (Balthasar H, Dubois-Arber F., 2007, p. 37).

Another problem identified with the Don Juan project (in both the pilot assessment and follow-up assessment) was that **sex buyers could not be left unsupervised with female outreach workers because they would mistake female outreach workers for prostitutes**, “*which is not always well experienced by the workers*” (Balthasar H, Dubois-Arber F., 2007, p. 39).

## COMMERCIAL SEX WEBSITE FUNDING

The Federal Police helped fund a commercial sex website in 2019. It is a partnership of the NGOs Fleur de Pave and Aspasie, called “*Call Me to Play*,” which began operation in 2019. The website allows for free commercial sex advertisements, sex buyer forums, and education about the risk of STIs associated with sex acts men are interested in buying.

The NGO claims the commercial sex website promotes “*humanization and empowerment of [“sex workers”] and raising customer awareness...*” (Aspasie, 2019). According to one of the organizations, the website “*became a major player in paid sex online*” (Fleur de Pave, 2019). The organization boasts that:

“*A network of ethical photographers aware of the issues of sex work on the Internet has joined our platform...*” and that a “*harm reduction pop-up appears on Call Me To Play when clients or escorts request or propose risky practices. It appeared 290,000 times in 2019.*”

Last year, one of the harm reduction NGOs that runs the website integrated:

*“... new, more inclusive illustrations and to diversify the themes covered, such as: risk reduction according to the different services (girlfriend experience, **scatophilia and urophilia, BDSM, etc.**), gender-related issues and working on the Internet...”*  
 (Aspasie, 2023)

This organization, which receives significant funding from the City of Geneva, Canton of Geneva, and federal sources such as, OFSP and Federal Police (Aspasie, n.d.-b), has some “inclusive” illustrations on its main website, which includes a cartoon of a man contemplating whether he wants to buy a woman that will allow him **to beat her and ejaculate on her face**, or only one that will perform oral sex on him (Aspasie, n.d.-c, p. 61 ).

In their Informational guide, *Practice in Geneva A guide for sex workers in Geneva*, the NGO helpfully reminds women that exposure to “sweat, urine or faeces” (Aspasie, n.d.-c, p. 22, original English translation) carries no risk of HIV/AIDS infection. They advise women selling sex:

*“Think about the clothes you wear and be careful to avoid jewellery or accessories such as necklaces or scarves that could be pulled off or used to strangle you. We advise you to wear clothes and shoes you are comfortable in if you work on the streets, so that you are able to run away if necessary (or run barefoot)....Remain vigilant at all times...”*  
 (Aspasie, n.d.-c, p. 54, original English translation)

Only several paragraphs later they almost comically claim, “Never forget that you are the person in charge.” (Aspasie, n.d.-c, p. 55, original English translation)

Their sister organization, which also facilitates the website, received CHF 1,084,060 (USD 1,313,868) in 2023 in public funding alone, of which CHF 795,106 – almost 85% of total expenditure – went to staff salaries & benefits and “other personnel costs” and only CHF 2,079 (0.2% of total expenditure) went to “user services” (Fleur de Pavé, 2023).

If there are teams of frontline workers, such as licensed social workers, receiving the bulk of the salaries that seems like a legitimate use of public expenses, but when public funds also go to making commercial sex websites, cartoons of men contemplating ejaculating on womens faces, and educational material about men defecating and urinating on women (scatophilia and urophilia) – such things deserve closer scrutiny.

But was the website effective? In 2023, almost 50% of the new escort account profiles were refused validation mainly “due to their fraudulent origin (attempt to scam potential buyers), or because they do not correspond to the purpose of *Call Me to Play* (men looking for sexual partners)...” (Aspasie, 2023, p. 23). An additional 10 profiles were flagged as scams accounts after approval (Aspasie, 2023, p. 23).

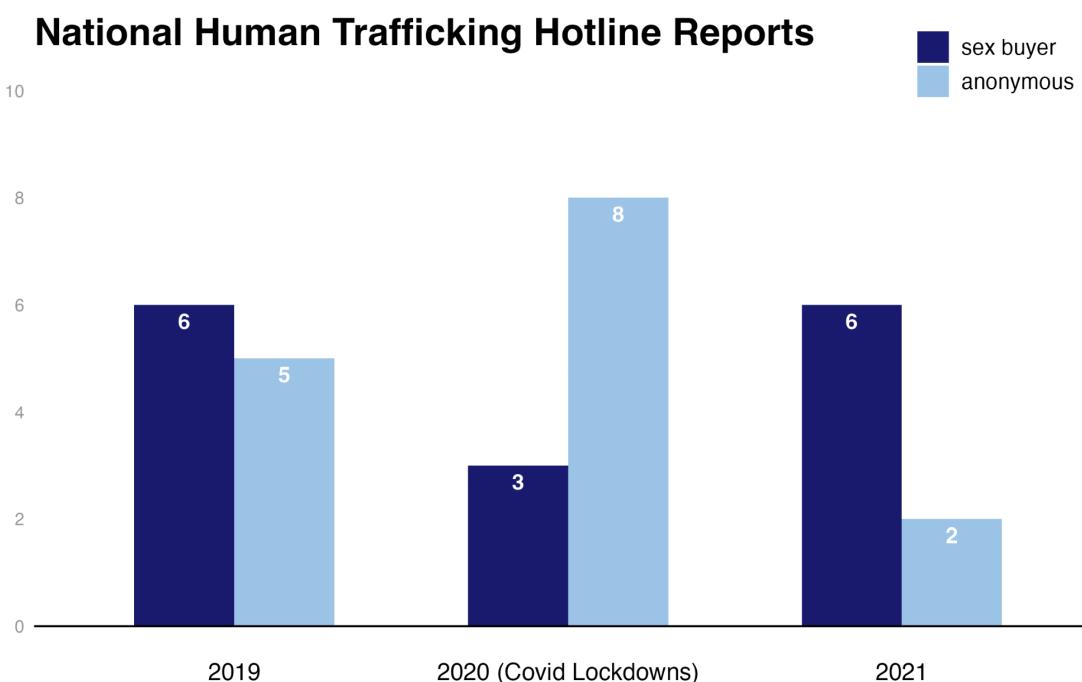
It seems the platform may help men not get scammed by fake accounts, but it does not appear that sex buyers are held to any rigorous standards to use the website. It's unclear what measures the organizations have taken to ensure women's profiles are not controlled by pimps, as has been documented in other cases in Switzerland (Keller, T., Hudec, T., 2023) and globally. Most importantly, there is no actual evidence the website provides any

meaningful safety for women. As with all aspects of the legal sex trade, it is only the sex buyers, NGOs, and pimps who benefit.

## SEX BUYER AWARENESS CAMPAIGN

In 2021, Swiss Crime Prevention (SKP), together with the Basel-Stadt cantonal police sponsored another campaign to help engage sex buyers to report trafficking (ACT212, 2021). Advertisements were placed on commercial sex websites with contact information for the National Human Trafficking hotline (ACT212).

Sex buyer-reported cases had been extremely low – only six reports in 2019 three during the 2020 COVID lockdowns, and six after lockdowns in 2021 (ACT212, 2021). Notably, reports from sex buyers dropped during the lockdown, when prostitution was illegal, but anonymous reports rose – showing a very small number of sex buyers report exploitation, and they will likely not be deterred by the criminalization of sex buying – they would simply report anonymously.



Data Source: ACT212 Annual Reports 2019 - 2021: <https://www.act212.ch/en/aboutus-1/annualfinances>

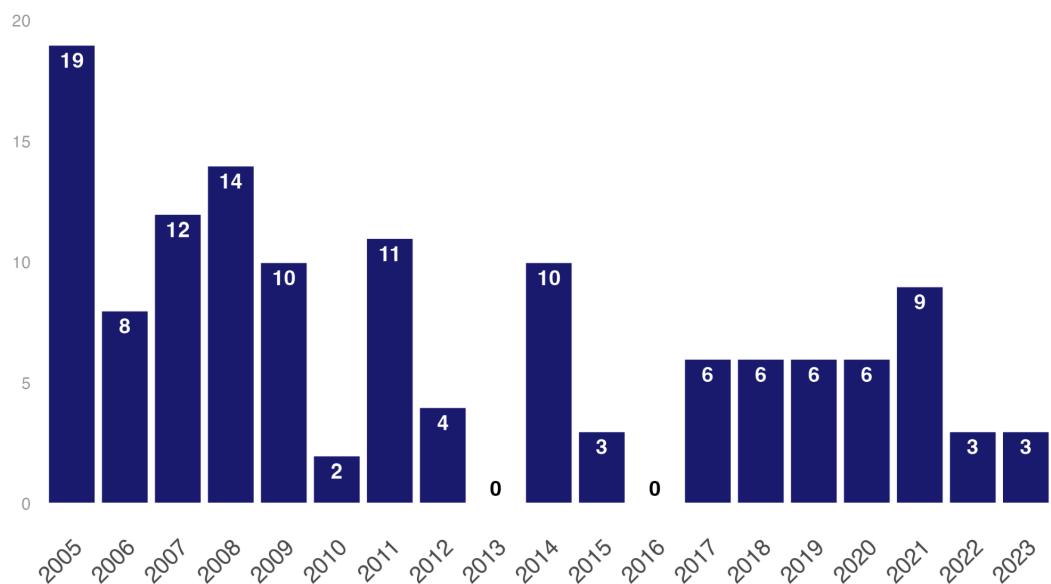
After the campaign, which concluded in 2022, ACT212, which had for years published detailed disaggregated data on reports of sex trafficking, stopped reporting these numbers and instead asserted their campaign was a success. In fact, it was *such* a success that according to the organization, there was a massive “14% increase” in sex buyer reports from the previous year (ACT212, 2022) and the proportion of reports from sex buyers increased from “2.3% to 16.9%” (ACT212, 2022).

While this sounds quite impressive, there were only 41 total reports of sex trafficking to ACT212 in 2022. If 16.9% of the 41 reports were sex buyers, it would equal roughly seven sex

buyer reports. Likewise, a “14% increase” in sex buyer reports from the previous year (which was six) also equals roughly seven sex buyer reports. Meaning, we can infer that there was **an additional one sex buyer report after their “successful” campaign** – and after millions of sex acts purchased annually. Later, the NGO glosses over the fact that most reports were from victims, family, and neighbors, and there were only “a few” (ACT212, 2023) reports from sex buyers and social workers combined in both 2022 and 2023.

Sex buyer reports made to FIZ, another organization which provides services to migrant women and human trafficking victims (funded by the Federal Police and the Canton of Zurich), are significantly lower than when FIZ started documenting this data in 2005, with only three sex buyer reports made in 2023 and 2022 vs. 19 in 2005 (FIZ, 2022; FIZ, 2023; FIZ, 2005).

### Sex-Buyer Reported Trafficking Cases to Fiz



Data Source: FIZ Annual Reports 2005 - 2023: <https://www.fiz-info.ch/de/Downloads>

This finding of sex buyers being resistant to report human trafficking has been documented globally. In Germany, which also operates under a legal prostitution system, 62% of men who purchase sex claimed to believe they purchased sex from a trafficked woman but only 1% of these men reported it to the authorities (Farley, M. et al, 2022).

## SEX BOXES

The Strichplatz Depot represents Switzerland's most ambitious harm reduction project yet – a drive-through prostitution facility with "sex boxes" where men can park their cars to be sexually serviced on demand for as little as CHF 30 for "full service" (Bathyany, S., & Koch, C., 2018). With an initial setup cost of CHF 2.395 million and annual operational costs of CHF 800,000 (City of Zürich Sozialdepartement, 2018a), the Strichplatz was made in response to the "dangerous and unsustainable" conditions at another street prostitution area, Sihlquai (City of Zürich, n.d. -a).

The Strichplatz opened in late 2013 and reportedly had an average of around **15 women** per night in 2013 (Federal Council, 2015, p. 49), which doubled by 2015 (NZZ, Aug 19, 2015). "According to the Department of Social Affairs, between **50 and 100 vehicles** travelled through the square **every night** in spring 2014" (Federal Council, 2015, p. 49).

The Zurich City Council has lauded the project, claiming it has met its objectives by contributing to the fight against human trafficking, promoting safer sex practices and even protects sex buyers' wives from STIs (City of Zürich Sozialdepartement, 2018a; City of Zürich, n.d. -a). However the City Council also admits that protection is not required at the facility (City of Zürich, n.d. -a) and that "*Johns often lure sex workers with higher earnings for sex without a condom...*" (City of Zürich Sozialdepartement, 2018a), an offer which these women cannot refuse, as the "majority of sex workers" at the depot are "**women from Eastern Europe affected by great poverty... with no or only marginal education**" (City of Zürich Sozialdepartement, 2018a).

The ease with which the government officials admit this is surprising, given that Swiss courts have on numerous occasions (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2010<sup>9</sup>; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2009<sup>10</sup>; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2007<sup>11</sup>; UNODC, 2012; US State Department. 2022) explicitly concluded that **consent to engage in prostitution cannot freely be given if one is suffering from "economic hardship" or even "social difficulties..."** (UNODC, 2012, p. 65), a definition which encompasses almost all women selling sex in Switzerland. For instance, 86% of women in mandatory information sessions to work in prostitution in Geneva are migrants on 90-day visas, primarily from Spain and Eastern Europe (Aspasie, 2018)

*"Most of the participants who arrive at the information session say they have no information about the salon they will be working at. They are unaware of the working conditions or the residence permit they will be granted."* (Aspasie, 2023, p. 35)

<sup>9</sup> "...the Federal Court confirmed that consent will be invalid if it is given by persons facing economic hardship who agree to be taken to Switzerland to engage in prostitution." (UNODC, 2010)

<sup>10</sup> "As confirmed by other Swiss cases, a situation of vulnerability may also include **economic and social difficulties or the personal and financial dependencies/liabilities. In these situations any consent to prostitution and (illegal) entry into Switzerland is seen as void.**" (UNODC, 2009)

<sup>11</sup> "Specifically, it confirms the principle that any recruitment of foreign women from countries in which they face economic or social hardships for the purpose of prostitution in Switzerland amounts to exploitation of a situation of vulnerability and voids any consent by the victims to engage in prostitution." (UNODC, 2012)

While the city council, harm reduction NGOs and the media (Blick, 2018) claim that these sex boxes significantly contribute to combating human trafficking, the contrary is true. **Every year, there are 100 cases of human trafficking identified at this site** (City of Zürich Sozialdepartement, 2018a) – one victim of sex trafficking every several days.

According to a 2019 academic paper, the organization paid to supervise the site, as well as other government-funded organizations admitted that it is "**impossible to uncover in short interactions whether coercion exists**" (Fábián, Gergely, et al., 2019). Furthermore, Swiss police report that women, fearing deportation or other repercussions, often deny being victimized (Federal Council, 2015), which suggests that this figure of 100 victims of human trafficking at this one site annually could be a significant underestimation.

While officials claim the identification of 100 trafficking victims at the sex boxes is only evidence of the project's success, these "identifications" rarely lead to freedom for the victim or accountability for the perpetrator. This is primarily due to a broader problem, where professionals in Switzerland operate under an "empowerment"<sup>12</sup> framework and avoid directly intervening in situations of sex trafficking unless the victim expressly asks for assistance to avoid disempowering victims (Human Trafficking Platform, n.d. -a).

For example, despite one NGO, who operates *Call Me To Play*, identifying six victims of human trafficking in 2019, only one victim received resources to put an "...end to this violence and regain her freedom..." (Aspasie, 2019, p. 13) as the other victims were psychologically incapable of talking about their abuse. It appears the other sex trafficking victims remained in exploitation while the NGO slowly worked with the women to "...verbalize their situation of exploitation..." (Aspasie, 2019, p. 13) It's unclear if now, years later, any of these women have regained their freedom or if any perpetrators have been arrested.

Another harm reduction NGO that serves women in prostitution, describes witnessing a woman in exploitation but claimed they would wait for her to hopefully, "one day" "slowly gain trust" (Solidaria Zurich, 2022a) in them and verbally confirm her exploitation before they would report her abuse.

The federally funded Swiss Human Trafficking Platform tells witnesses of trafficking to "[e]ncourage the person concerned to contact one of the four specialised agencies..." They warn witnesses *not* to report abuse without prior consent from the victim.

**"Do not do anything without first asking the trafficked person.** As a victim of human trafficking, they have been controlled by others – **do not perpetuate this control.** It is important to respect the will of the trafficked person so that they can trust you..." (Human Trafficking Platform, n.d. -a).

They simultaneously acknowledge "many victims remain in exploitative situations for years..." and it is "[o]nly when the pressure of suffering is very high do they try to escape..."

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<sup>12</sup> According to Bugnon, G., & Chimienti, M., with Chiquet, L. (2009b), "Empowerment is a process aimed at increasing personal, interpersonal and political power so that individuals can act to improve their life situation (Gutiérrez 1990)" (p. 9)

The City of Zurich itself echoes this advice to buyers who witness abuse, instructing them, **“under no circumstances”**... should you pressure the victim or do something against their will, **“not even involve the authorities”** City of Zürich (n.d. -b). This empowerment framework directly contradicts the Federal Council's own recognition that:

*“It is rare for a victim to turn to someone for help on their own initiative - be it authorities, counselling centres or even self-employed prostitutes. The term 'Chains in the head' is very apt in this context.” (Federal Council, 2015, p. 72)*

Yet the system insists on waiting for these same psychologically trapped victims to self-report or reach out for help. Case studies document the outcomes of this approach (City of Zürich, 2018b). Consider their handling of Christina H., a 19-year-old Hungarian orphan at the sex boxes. Despite noting she was constantly surveilled by “colleagues,” used alcohol to cope with her sex work, and was “never alone,” the NGO workers observed her exploitation without reporting it to the police – it was only when she texted, *“I broke. Help me”* did they act - and even then, she ultimately returned to her traffickers and was later moved to and exploited in Germany.

In another case, Paula C. had to use a burst condom as an excuse to seek help, despite having previously asked the NGO repeatedly if they would assist in emergencies. When she finally got a moment alone, she begged, *“Please help me, I'm constantly being watched, I have no money, they're taking everything from me - I have to leave now. They are eating – please help me.”* **Another reported case of exploitation lasted months before intervention** – again, only at the victim's express request.

Of the three cases presented as successes, two women were subsequently trafficked to Germany – *none* of their exploiters faced consequences.

The City claims there have been no “*major* violent incidents” at the Strichplatz while acknowledging they respond to “*physical or psychological violence...*” with premises bans (City of Zürich, n.d. -c) rather than police intervention. This practice of avoiding law enforcement involvement and associated formal documentation ensures violence remains statistically invisible, which is later cited as evidence of the project's success.

Perhaps, though, the Zurich Police are not equipped to handle exploitation and violence in the sex industry either. A City of Zurich report astonishingly admits that their specialized trafficking unit, Gruppe Milieuauklärung (MAK) simply “motivates them [victims] to leave...” their situation as sex trafficking victims (Steiner & Brander, 2011, p. 26).

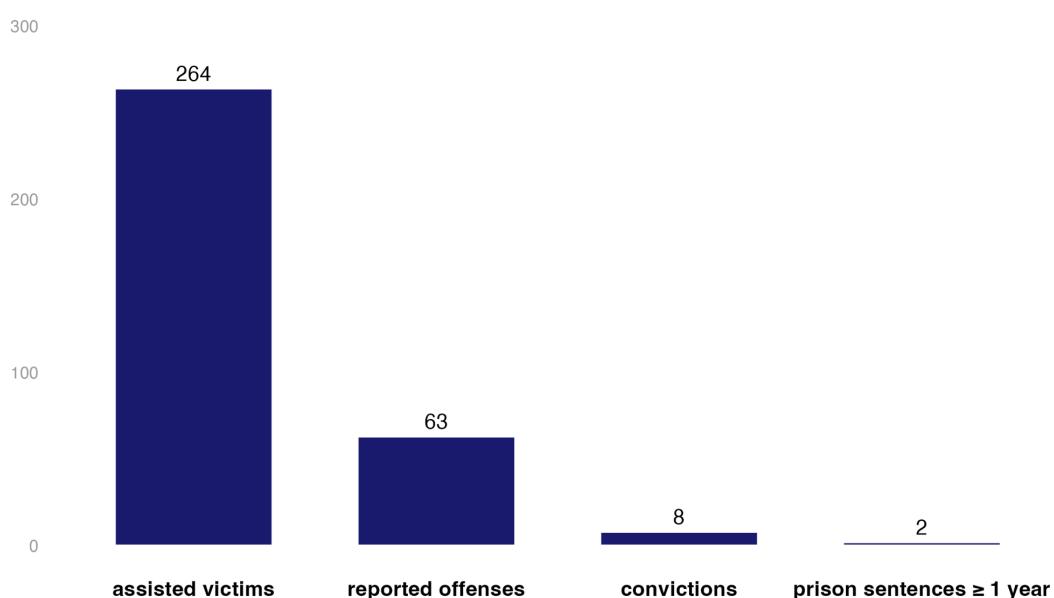
The city celebrates the unit as a success, due to one victim referral to a harm reduction NGO monthly (Steiner & Brander, 2011, p. 26). They report no information on the number of women who actually gain long term freedom. Without corresponding perpetrator arrest, victims, suffering from fear, threats, or the “loverboy” form of human trafficking, often return to the trafficker.

This “empowerment” approach ensures NGOs maintain their role as essential intermediaries, police avoid difficult cases, and the government can claim success through high

“identification” numbers that rarely translate to actual rescue while traffickers operate with impunity - as evidenced by the fact that despite an ever growing number of identified trafficking victims documented as receiving “support” (in 2023 alone, federal statistics reported 373 total victims and the Human Trafficking Platform reported 488 total victims<sup>13</sup>), there has been no commensurate increase in trafficker convictions in decades.

In 2023, there were only 13 convictions for Article 195 (“promotion of prostitution”)<sup>14</sup> and eight for Article 182 (“human trafficking”, which includes labor trafficking; Federal Statistical Office, 2024, see Appendix Table 3). Even more disturbingly, an overwhelming **66% of convicted traffickers receive fully suspended sentences or imprisonment of less than one year** (US State Department, 2024).

## Human Trafficking System Attrition (2022): Art. 182



Data sources: Swiss Federal Statistical Office (2024); Federal Statistical Office. (2025); US State Department (2024). Note. The most recent prison sentencing data available is for 2022, from the US TIP report; no data available for Article 195. Assisted victims include individuals who, according to federal relief statistics, received victim counseling from support services. Inclusion in this category does not necessarily reflect any type of legal classification.

**Shockingly, the city of Zurich openly admits the women at their supervised drive through sex site are being pimped and exploited.**

The City claims that, “*The safe, stable frame protects sex workers from pimp access...*” (City of Zürich Sozialdepartement, 2018a). However, in the question and answer section in the Zurich city website, responding to the question, “*Aren’t the pimps just standing in front of the prostitute?*” the City of Zurich responds:

<sup>13</sup> It’s not clear why there is this discrepancy

<sup>14</sup> Article 195, despite the name, is essentially sex trafficking. Pimping (profiting off of an individual's prostitution and often controlling working conditions) is not illegal in Switzerland. See Appendix Table 1 for full definitions.

*“Both the support offered on the square and the ban on access for pimps increased the scope for sex workers compared to Sihlquai and **reduced the pimps' direct access**. This is **undoubtedly progress** for sex workers, **even if the relationship of exploitation remains in principle**. The pimps are turned away in front of the square and in the surrounding area.” (City of Zürich, n.d.-a)*

Instead of arresting the pimps who are forcing Eastern European women of “great poverty” to sexually serve Swiss men against their will, the city council has “...responded to the concern...” (City of Zürich., n.d. -c) of Swiss men who don't want to use their family car while paying for sexual access to the *Eastern European women of great poverty*, and have expanded the depot to include standing sex boxes and access for men on bicycles and motorcycles. The Zurich City Council claims, “*So far, the experiment has been running smoothly*” (City of Zürich Sozialdepartement, 2018a).

A representative from the NGO paid by the city to supervise the site agrees that, “*The Strichplatz is a complete success*” (Batthyany, S., & Koch, C., 2018). She boasts that women can receive condoms and informational pamphlets at her office, which is nearby, and that in the winter, women are even offered vegetable soup, “everything is very orderly.”

Women who sell sex at The Strichplatz however, claim the market is saturated and prices have been driven so low, regardless of whether they are provided with condoms (or pamphlets and vegetable soup), they are forced to have unprotected sex to make ends meet (Batthyany, S., & Koch, C., 2018). Other NGOs working with women in prostitution who are not paid to work at the facility agree that the facility and regulatory changes have not improved health practices due to sex buyers' continuous demands for unprotected sex (André Müller, 2018). Zurich police claim,

*“There are no exact numbers, since not all those affected report...The situation should have improved since the line on Sihlquai no longer exists, and yet everything has remained the same. The range of milieu secondary offenses, such as robbery, **assault, coercion, did not change much.**”* (Batthyany, S., & Koch, C., 2018).

Recent reports note the conditions at the depot have subsequently declined further (Blick, April 16, 2024). While the city council brags about no “**major assault**” documented at the depot, **police on-site report that “assault” has not been reduced due to the facility**. When it comes to male violence against women, how does the city council distinguish between a “normal” (and apparently acceptable) assault versus a “major” noteworthy one?

## PROJECT ROSE (RESOURCES, ORIENTATION, SELF-DETERMINATION, EMPOWERMENT)

The same harm reduction NGO that oversees the sex box program, and deemed it “a complete success” was recently made responsible for a new professional reorientation pilot program (Project ROSE), and will likely receive additional funding in case of its success (City

of Zürich, 2023a)<sup>15</sup>. This was in response to an assessment, which concluded that there was a need for exit services for women in prostitution (City of Zürich, 2023a).

However, a report published on the City of Zurich website explicitly states the goal of ROSE is *not* to help women exit prostitution, but rather to normalize and “destigmatize” it.

*“ROSE contributes to the **destigmatization of sex work** in professional reorientation through networking, experience and raising awareness...”*

***At ROSE, the project goal is not defined as “switching or leaving prostitution”, but rather sex work is recognized as work and the self-determination of sex workers and their individually defined goals and successes are defined as the guiding principles of the career counseling process...***

*A crucial factor in the success of ROSE is the basic attitude underlying the project. The focus of projects for professional reorientation should be on the provision of resources and interdisciplinary networking, and **not on the further stigmatization of sex work...***

*This is shown by findings from France, where the so-called “exit programs” that were introduced in connection with the ban on the purchase of sex are mostly run by organizations that advocate the abolition of prostitution.” (City of Zürich, 2023a).*

ROSE dismisses France’s program, seemingly as a failure, yet while ROSE explicitly avoids encouraging exiting the sex industry in favor of normalizing the sex trade, France’s Parcours de Sortie de la Prostitution (PSP) (Pathway out of Prostitution), which was introduced as part of the Nordic Model in 2016, achieved a 95% success rate in assisting women exit prostitution (Causette, 2023).

Frances’s PSP provides a €343/month allowance, accommodation, support in finding employment, and a two-year provisional residence permit for people in prostitution. Around 90% of the women in the program are migrants (Causette, 2023). Other services provided include language courses (Mouvement du Nid, 2023, p. 16). This exit service provides practical solutions to help the most vulnerable women - precisely the population excluded from Switzerland’s ROSE project, which only serves those legally in the country (City of Zürich, 2023b).

Despite calling project ROSE a “success,” no data is reported on how many – if any – women have actually left prostitution or found a new career due to the efforts of project ROSE.<sup>16</sup> There are other concerning statements from the ROSE documents, for example, claiming that leaving prostitution is not always “realistic for financial and personal reasons...” that despite a broad range of career goals of their clients, it is important to “*develop realistic goals with clients...*” and that “*The motives for a career change are very broad and it is important to ensure a continuous reality check*” (City of Zürich, 2023a).

This follows a concerning pattern, where NGOs and even the government behave as though the mere act of funding a project represents a success. There have been no quantitative

<sup>15</sup> They have already said they will need additional funding for the project and it was a great “success” (City of Zürich, 2023b).

<sup>16</sup> Of course, they have already said success is not measured by “switching or leaving prostitution.”

evaluations of these expensive harm reduction projects to determine whether they achieved their stated goals (such as reducing HIV transmission, human trafficking, sex buyer violence, or unprotected sex). NGOs themselves define success through weak metrics like "made contact with the target population" or "number of condoms distributed." If harm reduction were working, shouldn't we observe a reduction in harm?

## WHEN "FOOLPROOF" FAILS: THE BREAKDOWN OF OVERSIGHT

### POLICE INTERVIEWS CIRCUMVENTED

Important and seemingly foolproof methods to protect women from human trafficking and human rights abuses are police inspections, mandatory health inspections and outreach checks and even, in some cantons, personal police interviews prior to obtaining a prostitution permit to ensure consent. However, even Switzerland's most rigorous protections fail in practice.

Police interviews meant to verify consent before issuing prostitution permits are easily circumvented. The Zurich police admitted, "**pimps had informed themselves relatively quickly about how to appear before the authorities... instructing their prostitutes accordingly**" (Federal Council, 2015, p. 42). Since authorities bear the burden of proof, they remain powerless even when they strongly suspect trafficking. Women who later prove to be trafficking victims pass these interviews without detection, often because they themselves didn't yet anticipate their exploitation when they entered the country (Federal Police, 2016).

### INSPECTIONS EVADED AND INACTION OF AUTHORITIES

Some cantons, such as the canton of Geneva, have contracted with harm reduction providers to conduct health inspections of brothels (Aspasie, 2022, p. 13). The aim of these inspections is to ensure the safety of the women working in Geneva's indoor prostitution establishments.

However, from 2019 to 2023, out of 886 planned visits, **almost 50% were unsuccessful** (Aspasie 2019, 2021, 2022, 2023),<sup>17</sup> with an average of only one to two people met per brothel in 2023 (Aspasie, 2023), indicating an obvious evasion of regulatory oversight. It was unclear if contacts with brothel operators and receptionists were documented as "meetings."

The inability to conduct these checks was attributed to incorrect directions, empty brothels on arrival, or women being busy engaging in "work" activities (Aspasie, 2022). There is also lack of clarity on whether brothel operators were given advance notice about these visits, whether harm reduction NGOs persisted in attempting to make contact with the brothels, or if there were repercussions for evading inspections.

Outreach from brothels revealed concerning findings:

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<sup>17</sup> Aspasie Annual Reports (excluding 2020, due to COVID closures)

*"Many salons are open 24/7. We can observe sleep disorders among SW ["sex workers"] who are unable to find a regular rhythm, which impacts their physical and mental health." (Aspasie, 2021, p. 11)*

*"...we continue to note that certain salons offer poor working conditions, and nothing is being done by the managers concerned to try to improve them. Some rents are indecently high and sometimes concern unsanitary apartments, but the procedures undertaken to try to prove wear and tear are generally doomed to failure." (Aspasie, 2021)*

*"When a SW has little or no command of the French language, it is difficult to negotiate the conditions of the service and the danger of accepting risky (unprotected) practices is higher. In certain salons, **it is a third person (receptionist) who negotiates instead of SW, which calls into question the notion of consent.**" (Aspasie, 2021, p.14)*

*"The occupancy price of a room varies from CHF 100 to 150/day; a growing number of places charge 50% of the earnings made by SW." (Aspasie, 2021, p.14)*

*"The monthly rent amounts to **3000 or 4000 francs per month** for accommodation that is often modest, even obsolete. This is why, **even if the earnings are significant, the costs linked to carrying out the activity are just as significant, which creates situations of precariousness and poverty.**" (Aspasie, 2018, p.11)*

*"...in 2021, there are still salons where the SW cannot change the sheets after each client, where the working **rooms cannot be ventilated due to the absence of windows**, where the toilets are shared with customers and where the common space is very limited (does not allow keeping a distance and often cannot be ventilated either)." (Aspasie, 2021, p.14)*

*"...The incompetence of certain managers and the combination of "work and living space" in the salons put SW in worrying insecurity, leading to anxiety and the risk of losing their housing." (Aspasie, 2021, p.14)*

*"...Among the risk factors encountered are exorbitant rents, abuse of imposed working hours, problematic erotic ads, pressure to consume alcohol and psychoactive substances, pressure to perform risky services, the presence of cameras filming common areas, etc. Given the very high number of sex workers, **parlors leverage competition to impose risky practices and behaviors....**" (Aspasie, 2023, p. 15)*

*"...they are very isolated in the clubs...**Many don't even know where they are** or how to buy a public transport ticket." (Solidaria Zurich, 2020, p. 8)<sup>18</sup>*

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<sup>18</sup> Note. The NGO further explains "The clients tell their wives that they're going on a bike tour in the Zurich Oberland with their colleagues. Then the men in cycling gear enter the brothel."

Such reports from NGOs are not new. Outreach visits dating back to 2011 from government funded health educators reported similar disturbing situations.

*"The influx of young women from the new EU countries has been confirmed once again this year: these women often have a low education level and **can barely communicate in the local languages, if at all.**" (APiS, 2011, p. 2)*

*"An additional difficulty arises in particular with Hungarians of Roma origin, because they are often led by a woman, a "**capo**", and it is only if she agrees to listen that we can transmit [HIV] prevention messages to the women concerned. **This target group is very young, under 25, and the prices set are much too low....**" (APiS, 2014)*

The next year the same outreach organization continued to report abuse:

*"We observe that a growing number of women from Albania who do not speak German or who speak little German are arriving in Switzerland. In the tolerance zone (Ochsen/Webergasse), Hungarians are in the majority with a few women from Latin America and a minority of women from Africa. **It is frightening to note that there are many unwanted pregnancies among the group of Hungarians of Roma origin. They offer their services without condoms and at knockdown prices...**" (APiS, 2015, p. 3)*

According to Swiss police:

*"The victims of human trafficking are monitored almost constantly, whether by the pimps themselves or their overseers (**capo** women) or minders. They have to report daily to their tormentors on their labour performance. Confiscated notepads show that the perpetrators keep detailed records of the prostitutes' services and their earnings."* (Federal Council, 2015, p. 71)

In a regulated system, one would imagine the NGOs would immediately report abuse to the police, who would then raid the brothels, rescue the victims, and arrest the traffickers. However, the publicly funded NGOs that witnessed sex-trafficked, pregnant Hungarian women appear to have taken a typical harm reduction approach – *informational material!* Material for sex buyers called "*Want sex? Information for paid sex customers*" was made available in German and material for women selling sex was created, called "**Termination of pregnancy in Switzerland...**" (APiS, 2015), with the NGO noting the need to translate material to Hungarian.

The issue of **pregnant women in prostitution in Switzerland** cannot be a surprise to the government or harm reduction NGOs which support full decriminalization of the sex industry. ProCore even has a **sexualized photograph of a pregnant "sex worker" in lingerie in their 2023 annual report** (ProCore, 2023b, p. 7).

Despite 56 of 250 sampled brothels in a 2015 Federal Police commissioned report having explicit references to Asia or Asian cultures (Biberstein, L., & Killias, M., 2015), NGOs report almost no Asian clients (i.e. women selling sex/or victims of trafficking) and that "access" to

them was often “impossible” (Maria Magdalena, 2005, p. 7). NGOs have documented this isolation for decades - there were reports in 2005 of Asian women being inaccessible and, like other migrant women, unable to even verbally communicate with outreach personnel (Maria Magdalena, 2005, p. 7). Almost 20 years later in 2022, harm reduction NGOs reported that “getting into contact with Chinese women is hardly possible” (LISA Association, 2022, p. 10). These are not signs of empowered “sex work” – but pervasive human trafficking.

Police perform random inspections on brothels. Like with health inspections, brothels are often empty upon police arrival (Sofia Pekmez and Wilfred Rebetez, 2019). This is especially concerning due to previously documented corruption within the police force in which at least 20 Swiss police officers had close links with brothel operators (Sofia Pekmez and Wilfred Rebetez, 2019). The Federal Council (2015) states :

*“...the control activities of the **authorities concentrate on checking residence and work permits. The working conditions and the presence of signs of human trafficking or promotion of prostitution are hardly checked in practice.** The reasons for this are the lack of resources and **low priority among the police**, the orientation of the regulations towards residence and employment status, and the **unwillingness of possible victims of pimps or traffickers to cooperate and testify in court proceedings...**” (p. 58)*

According to Földházi, A., & Chimienti, M. (2007):

*“Some undocumented sex workers are hidden by their colleagues when the police arrive. Thus, in many establishments, **surveillance camera systems are used as much to detect the police as aggressive clients.** This information corroborates the hypothesis that salon prostitution is more conducive to the development of illegal prostitution.” (p. 24)*

Due to the lack of cooperation on the part of potential victims, likely due to fear of the abuser or of deportation, in the case of suspected abuse, authorities have been known to charge brothel operators with regulatory violations with which they do not need victim cooperation (Bugnon, G., Chimienti, M., & Chiquet, L., with Eberhard, J., 2009, p. 42)

In 2023, 28% of brothels were shut down due to regulatory violations and “unscrupulous” practices in one district of Geneva alone (Aspasie, 2023, p.15). Rather than the women, who were likely victims of exploitation, receiving support and shelter, many women were suddenly homeless (Aspasie, 2023, p.15, 18).

## LANGUAGE BARRIERS EXPLOITED

Language barriers between sex buyers and women selling sex lead to **third parties negotiating on behalf of women** (Aspasie, 2021, p. 14). In 2021, out of the successfully inspected brothels in Geneva, 25% of them had receptionists negotiate sex acts for women instead of the women who would be performing the acts (Aspasie, 2021, p. 13). It would be reasonable to assume the conditions for the women in brothels that evaded inspection are far worse.

In 2023, 97% of the 1,796 outdoors outreach interviews in Geneva occurred in a language other than French (Aspasie, 2023, p. 18). An NGO in Vaud noted the difficulty conducting mandatory information sessions for women in indoor prostitution due to language barriers, again, women speaking primarily Spanish and Romanian (Fleur de Pave, 2023, p. 13).

Research and oversight in Switzerland has been severely distorted due to "**a high proportion of SW [sex workers] present[ing] great difficulty in deciphering the written word**" (Lociciro S, et al., p. 30). In one example, a criminologist conducting a report for the Federal Police concluded that Swiss "erotic businesses" were *not* a gateway to human trafficking - based on testimony from brothel keepers' themselves – as he couldn't ask women selling sex themselves due to almost none of them speaking the national languages (Biberstein, L., & Killias, M., 2015). This is a common issue in research on the sex trade and has also been seen in New Zealand (Smith, J., 2023a).

## CONDOM DISTRIBUTION: ECONOMIC COERCION AND VIOLENCE TRUMPS HARM REDUCTION

There is a large investment in HIV prevention in Switzerland - including CHF 11.3 million (USD 13.7 million) in public funding distributed to Aids-Hilfe Schweiz from 2018-2023 (Aids-Hilfe Schweiz, n.d.). In 2022 alone, they distributed a massive 120,000 condoms and lubricants and 400 "care sets" to women selling sex. Despite their efforts, **72% of women in Swiss prostitution report having unprotected sex with a client in the past year** (Vu, F., Cavassini, et al., 2020), with 34% of respondents claiming this was due to to accept higher payments for unprotected sex due to financial necessity.

The organization also creates educational material, such as the pamphlet, "*Information For Sex Workers*," in which they provide education about **anal fisting and "Practices with urine or faeces (golden shower, wet games, scat, caviar)"** (Aids-Hilfe Schweiz, 2022b, p. 28, 29; original english text). The pamphlet informs women that HIV cannot pass through urine and faeces, however, parasites can – and you must always wash your hands thoroughly after "scat games" (Aids-Hilfe Schweiz, 2022b, p. 28, 29; original English text).

Given the massive funding streams coming in from the public sector, it would be surprising for many to learn that some NGOs actually *sell* safe sex material to women in prostitution – even reminding women they can *purchase* products from them in their educational brochures (Aspasie, 2024b). One NGO has published recommendations for brothel-keepers, including to have condoms available on-site, and helpfully note brothel-keepers can obtain large quantities of condoms from their organization (Aspasie, n.d. -a). Again, similar behavior reportedly occurs among NGOs in New Zealand (Buscke, M., 2024).

Despite this, **only 3.8%** of women in prostitution cited lack of access to condoms or unaffordability as the reason for unprotected sex (Lociciro S, et al., p. 55). Women face increased pressure for unsafe sex acts in brothels, where 60% of unprotected sex occurs. In a 2017 study from the University of Lausanne, there was a statistically significant association with unprotected sex and working in a brothel (Lociciro S, et al., p. 55). Many women live on-site, and are therefore unable to refuse demands from brothel-keepers who

pressure women to maximize profits, without fearing homelessness. Moreover, brothel-owners contest prevention information after health workers leave (Lociciro S, et al., p. 81).

**Sex buyers engage in “...violence or threats, price increases, manipulation and improper use of condoms...”** (Balthasar H, Dubois-Arber F, 2017, p. 45) to obtain unprotected sex. Even when condom use is agreed upon, “accidents,” such as condom tears and slips are very high, (44.6% vs. 1.3-3.6% in the general population) (Lociciro S, et al., p. 81) as are intentional removal of condoms (30.1%) (a practice known as “stealthing”, which has recently been made a criminal offense) (Federal Police, 2024). In another sample of women selling sex in Switzerland, 70.8% had experienced stealthing from a client in their lifetime (ProCore, 2024c).

## COMMERCIAL CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Buying minors aged 16 and over for “sex” – which is commercial child sexual exploitation – was legal in Switzerland until 2014 (The Federal Assembly the Swiss Confederation, 2020). There are roughly 10 convictions for Art. 196. (Sexual acts with minors against payment) annually (Appendix Table 3). No official statistics are available pertaining to sentences imposed, however collected media reports (see Appendix Table 2) show that, as with human trafficking, most convictions are dealt with with suspended sentences and fines, resulting in most offenders walking free.

This is true of a recent case in which several minors were being exploited out of a legal brothel in Switzerland. **Five men, including a prominent local politician**, were charged with Art.196 – at least one man had specifically asked for minors and paid extra to exploit them without a condom (Tages-Anzeiger, February 18, 2025). A sixth man's case is in progress.

Media reports further document that some men who undeniably “hand over” money at some point during exploitation are charged with “sexual act with child”<sup>19</sup> (Art.187) rather than with Art. 196, which masks the true prevalence of commercial child sexual exploitation in Switzerland. This occurred in a 2024 case of a 50-year-old who victimized a 14-year-old homeless girl.

A common theme among many harm reduction organizations globally is their view towards commercial child sexual exploitation. Take for instance a 2011 interview with the then director of the Swiss harm reduction NGO, Xenia:

*“...In line with a Council of Europe convention signed by the Swiss government last summer, the Swiss intend to criminalise the act of seeking sexual services from someone under 18, shifting the responsibility onto the clients.*

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<sup>19</sup> Art. 187. “1. Any person who engages in a sexual act with a child under 16 years of age, or, incites a child to commit such an activity, or involves a child in a sexual act, is liable to a custodial sentence not exceeding five years or to a monetary penalty...”

**For Wigger** [then director of the NGO] **this is definitely the wrong way to go.** 'Not because we think the clients shouldn't take on the responsibility but because **the problem cannot be solved with legal penalties.**'

**'...When a client goes into a salon where the lighting is low how he is supposed to check the sex worker's ID?'**

'We do believe that 18 year olds and those under 18 should be protected. But prevention work is what is needed here; grassroots **work by non-governmental organisations.**" (SwissInfo, February 17, 2011)

The position is not dissimilar from that of the NZPC, a New Zealand based harm reduction NGO:

**"Arrests by Police won't solve the problem; they'll just move somewhere less visible. We'd rather see resources put in support services for the young people.** Seeing that their needs are met is better than focusing on stopping demand. **We wouldn't like to see them arresting the clients.** An education programme might be more effective. **Some clients don't really realise they're breaking the law if she is over 16.** A few arrests won't stop the other sorts of clients that know they're breaking the law. (NZPC)" (Mayhew, P., Mossman, E., 2007, p. 64)

The global "sex worker rights group," Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP) claims that there are "... a range of motivations" for "young peoples' involvement in selling sex":

**"...including sexual initiative owing to love or pleasure, decisions made for economic or financial reasons, concerns about basic physical and economic survival, and forced or coerced Sex... Even young people in exploitative situations report complex feelings toward the person exploiting them, who may also be a source of love and support.** Some young people explain that they were able to resolve situations where they experienced coercion and sometimes continued to trade sex under different conditions." (NSWP, 2016, p. 7)

They claim that while some "young people" experience human rights abuses and find "selling sex" to be harmful and degrading, for others:

**"...selling or trading sex allowed them to meet familial responsibilities and obligations or provided them with the means to establish lives independent from their parents. For others it helped them to meet their basic needs and find community..."** (NSWP, 2016, p. 4) and that

**"Alternative economic opportunities to selling sex for many young people, including those who are under 18, are overwhelmingly irregular, informal, and sometimes very unsafe activities that carry their own risks..."** (NSWP, 2016, p. 5)

Finally, they claim:

**"Laws prohibiting 'prostitution' or trafficking can also compromise young peoples' support networks..." and "Laws criminalising third parties can sometimes deprive young people who sell sex from community support."** (NSWP, 2016)

## LESSONS FROM COVID

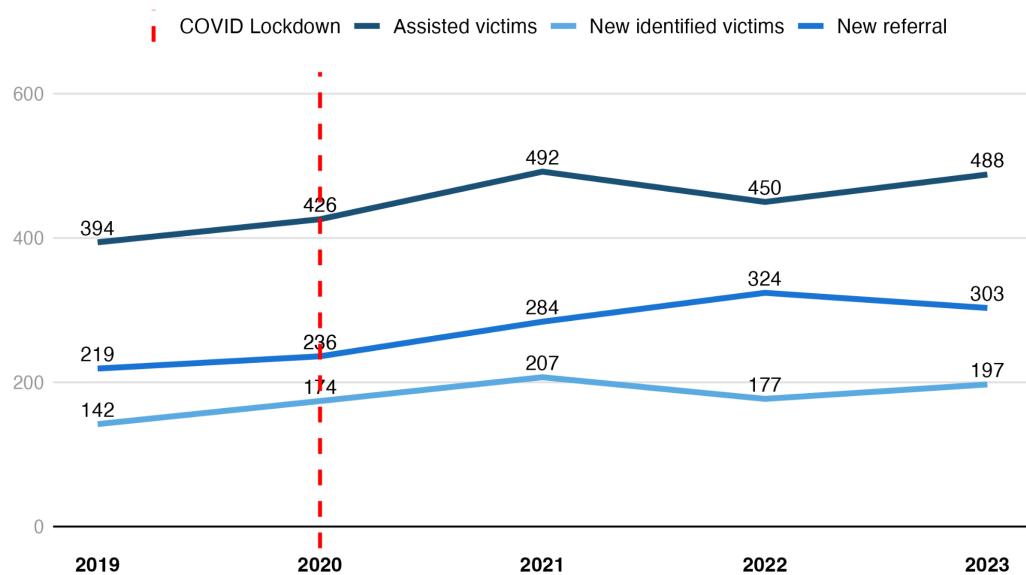
The COVID-19 ban on prostitution in Switzerland (March-June 2020) (Molnar & Ros) provided an unexpected test case for prohibition. Harm reduction NGOs claimed, without evidence, that the ban proved that prohibition increases danger and that women became "more exploitable, exposed to more violence." Another NGO claims they campaign for:

*"...the rights and protection of sex workers and rejects a ban on sex buying according to the Nordic model because it worsens the situation of sex workers. In illegality, sex workers are more exploitable, more vulnerable and less protected from violence by clients or pimps. It is also much more difficult to reach people who are forced into sex work and are victims of human trafficking. The Corona-related ban on prostitution has more than confirmed this...."* (Solidaria Zurich, 2024b)

However, data from the federally funded Swiss Human Trafficking Platform and federal relief statistics demonstrate that there was **no decrease in trafficking referrals, victim identification, or victim assistance** (Human Trafficking platform, 2023., Federal Statistical Office, 2023a).

A 2022 study, which even "*designed the questionnaire in accordance with the NGO's orientations...*" (Molnar & Ros) and alleged increased vulnerability, inadvertently proved the opposite. Among women working during the ban, **none experienced physical assault**. The only documented increases were in "client no-shows" (which researchers questionably classified as "fraud" and therefore increased "victimization"). Women also faced the usual pressure for unprotected sex - a problem that existed for decades before COVID lockdowns (Maria Magdalena, 2004, p. 2).

## Human Trafficking Platform Victim Statistics



Data source: Human Trafficking platform, 2023; Federal Statistical Office, 2023a

This proves Switzerland's most fundamental "truth" – that banning the purchase of sex would drive the sex industry underground – beyond the reach of harm reduction organizations is completely baseless.

## CONCLUSION: BEYOND HARM REDUCTION

Switzerland's regulatory approach has created a system where exploitation flourishes not underground, but in plain sight. The government's justifications for maintaining this system collapse under their own evidence. While claiming criminalization would drive exploitation "underground," The Federal Council (2015) acknowledged Sweden's success in reducing demand without increasing violence.

*"...one can therefore be fairly certain that prostitution in Sweden has at least not increased since 1999. The ban on buying sex has helped to combat prostitution, the proportion of men who bought sex fell from 13.6% to 8%... **The fear that prostitution has been forced underground and that prostitutes are therefore exposed to an increased risk of violence has not been substantiated on the basis of the available data... There is no evidence that the sex purchase ban has actually led to an increase in violence or risk.**" (p. 83)*

They document how "prostitution has deteriorated overall" since legalization in the Netherlands and **organized crime controls even "large parts" of the "legal" sector** (Federal Council, 2015, p. 95), noting how "all 120 window brothels in Utrecht" and roughly 50% of window brothels in Amsterdam (239 window brothels) were closed as a result of numerous

reports of sex trafficking and that **pimps operate “their businesses in places where the rules and controls are rather generous”** (Federal Council, 2015, p. 97).

Amazingly, however, the Swiss government concludes that they cannot ban the purchase of sex as it would surely drive the sex trade “underground” and worsen conditions, citing claims in publications from authors who were on the advisory committee (one, later an NGO president) at a Swiss harm reduction NGO (see, *The Outsized Influence of NGOs on Policy*)

We no longer need to guess the outcome of prohibition in Switzerland. Regardless of the statements from NGOs with financially vested interests, according to both support services and federal relief statistics, when COVID restrictions temporarily banned prostitution, **there was no reduction in victim identifications, referrals, or assistance** (Human Trafficking Platform, 2023; Federal Statistical Office, 2023a) and research showed **no increase in violence** (Molnar & Ros, 2022). Moreover, while reports from sex buyers remain extremely low, there was **no reduction** in tips from sex buyers to trafficking hotlines corresponding to the COVID prostitution ban.

Harm reduction NGOs argue decriminalization, and continued funding to their organizations, is essential to reduce HIV, yet there is no elevated prevalence of HIV among non-drug-using females in the sex industry in Switzerland (Bundesamt für Gesundheit, 2010). Moreover, according to Eurostat, **the standardized AIDS death rate<sup>20</sup> of females in Switzerland was higher than that of every European country that has implemented the Nordic Model** (Eurostat, 2023), indicating it's highly unlikely that adopting the Nordic Model in Switzerland would increase the prevalence or death rate of HIV/AIDS.<sup>21</sup>

NGOs attribute low HIV prevalence to their harm reduction efforts (Bugnon, G., Chimienti, M., & Chiquet, L., with Eberhard, J., 2009, p.73), however, even prior to the widespread use of antiretroviral therapy (ART) or pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), research showed that HIV among non-drug using women in the sex industry throughout Europe was low, their primary risk factor being intravenous drug use (Platt et al., 2013). More importantly, **there is no statistical association between the number of harm reduction services and the prevalence of HIV among women in the sex industry in Europe** (Platt, L., et al., 2013).<sup>22,23</sup>

Public health organizations note that, “*HIV has become a manageable chronic health condition, enabling people living with HIV to lead long and healthy lives*” (World Health Organization, 2024) and that patients can no longer spread HIV when taking appropriate treatment (CDC, n.d.). For people so concerned about “stigma,” some harm reduction NGOs seemed determined to keep the stigma of HIV alive.

<sup>20</sup> According to Eurostat: “Death rate of a population adjusted to a standard age distribution. As most causes of death vary significantly with people's age and sex, the use of standardised death rates improves comparability over time and between countries, as they aim at measuring death rates independently of different age. The standardised death rates used here are calculated on the basis of a standard European population (defined by the World Health Organization).”

<sup>21</sup> Standardized AIDS death rate: Switzerland (0.2); Iceland (0), Sweden (0.06), Norway (0.12), Ireland (0.04), France (0.18).

<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, the authors later restrict their analysis to countries within the interquartile range of harm reduction services. This results in all countries that have high rates of harm reduction providers but that did not have the expected low HIV prevalence being filtered out of the analysis. In this restricted sample, a very small negative correlation between the number of harm reduction services and HIV prevalence is seen. This restricted sample is what makes it into the 2015 book, *HIV epidemics in the European region: Vulnerability and response* (p. 173), which was published by the World Bank.

<sup>23</sup> Consistent with our findings from Switzerland, according to the European Center of Disease Prevention and Control (2023), the overwhelming majority of heterosexual HIV infections in Europe occur in high prevalence countries, beyond the reach of European NGO prevention efforts.

Many believe regulation will prevent violence in the sex industry, yet since Sweden banned the purchase of sex in 1999, there have been zero murders of women due to prostitution compared to 21 in Switzerland (Sex Industry Kills, n.d.)<sup>24</sup> during the same time, despite Sweden having around two million more residents and twice the homicide rate in the general population (1.1 in Sweden vs. 0.5 in Switzerland; World Bank, 2021). Even the Strichplatz depot, with constant NGO and police presence, could not reduce violence or exploitation.

The “underground trafficking” myth proves particularly hollow. Trafficking victims in legalized countries are typically found in legal brothels, not chained in hidden dungeons (O’Dea, C., 2014; Hasler, T., 2021; Rau, S., 2020; Rau, S. 2018; Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen, 2020; Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen, 2016; Tagesanzeiger, 2016).

According to the 2021 EUROPOL Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA):

*“Criminals are highly adept at exploiting our economy for their purposes... More than 80% of the criminal networks active in the EU use legal business structures for their criminal activities. About half of all criminal networks set up their own legal business structures or infiltrate businesses at a high level...Criminals infiltrate existing business structures to take advantage of the façade of legitimacy.”* (p.15, 24)

With regards to sex trafficking, EUROPOL (2021) reports:

*“This type of exploitation is particularly common in jurisdictions where sex work has been legalised.”* (p.71)<sup>25</sup>

Most victims, despite long suffering with “chains in the head” (Federal Council, 2015, p. 72), eventually escape through self-rescue (UNODC, 2022; Federal Statistical Office, 2023), not through the intervention of well-funded NGOs or police. Switzerland’s approach simply gives exploitation an official stamp of approval, allowing sex buyers to absolve themselves of responsibility while harm reduction NGOs witness - but don’t prevent – the trafficking of even pregnant women controlled by “capos.”

Arguments working conditions will deteriorate under the criminalization of the purchase of sex are equally hollow. Econometric analyses demonstrate a **causal relationship** – with **decriminalization of the sex industry directly and statistically significantly lowering the price of sex** (Cunningham, S., & Shah, M., 2018) through increased competition. The costs have dropped so low in Zurich that women report the **menus in legal brothels** offer life-threatening practices such as **strangulation and electrocution of women for CHF 50 and CHF 100, respectively** (SonntagsZeitung, 2024).

Women in the sex industry haven’t gained “negotiating power” with clients after legalization – **they can’t even speak the same language as clients – let alone “negotiate” with them.**

<sup>24</sup> Personal communication with Sex Industry Kills, website under maintenance

<sup>25</sup> EUROPOL notes: “Traffickers abuse victims of sexual exploitation, both adult and underage, male and female, in clandestine settings and public environments such as hotels, bars, restaurants, sauna clubs, strip clubs, night clubs, massage parlours and prostitution windows. These premises are usually owned by associates or by facilitators of traffickers who also profit from exploiting the victims.” (p. 70)

In practice, protective regulations, which give women the legal right to reject any client (as in New Zealand), low-cost condoms, or educational pamphlets are useless as poverty and violence compels cooperation with any demand (Geddes, C., 2022).

The Swiss model demonstrates how “harm reduction” can easily become harm enablement. The solution isn’t better regulation but fundamental reform. As Swiss courts have rightfully noted, consent can never exist under economic desperation (UNODC, 2012, p. 65) - yet the entire sex trade is built upon the exploitation of impoverished women. Real harm reduction requires reducing the scale of exploitation itself, not merely hiding its worst effects while enabling its growth. After all, **advertisements to electrocute migrant women are behind the closed doors of *legal* brothels in Switzerland – not “underground” in Sweden.**

The city of Zurich claims it is impossible to ban prostitution because of economic freedom in Switzerland which protects one’s chosen occupation. However, this economic freedom can legally be restricted in the interest of the public good (Isler, C. and Jyrkinen, M., 2018; Häfelin, U., & Haller, W., 2005) – they have simply chosen not to take this step despite the federal government and Zurich City Council’s own admission that prostitution is full of “coercion and exploitation” (City of Zurich, n.d. -a).

Advocates of full decriminalization might argue that Switzerland’s failures prove the need for even fewer regulations. Yet Switzerland has already legalized prostitution and pimping (Wyss., R., 2023) for 83 years, with even most migrant women theoretically having rights, health insurance, and social security. The only meaningful difference full decriminalization would bring is fewer zoning restrictions. This would do nothing to address the fundamental issues of economic coercion, trafficking, or exploitation - as evidenced by Belgium’s new law, which perversely limits women to refusing only ten clients per six months before facing government intervention (Espace P., 2024). The problem isn’t insufficient legalization but the inherent power dynamics of the sex trade itself. No amount of regulation – or deregulation – can protect women when the core issue is demand-driven exploitation.

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## APPENDIX A: TRAFFICKING DATA

According to the US State Department (2018) and Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (2015) prosecutors in Switzerland can use several statutes to address human trafficking, including: Trafficking in human beings (Art. 182), Encouraging prostitution (Art.195), Sexual acts with minors against payment (Art. 196), Coercion (Art. 181), and Exploitation of a person in a position of need or dependency (Art. 193); definitions below.

The final charges likely depend not just on the perpetrators actions, but the available evidence and the degree of victim cooperation. When authorities suspect trafficking to have occurred, but do not have victim cooperation or cannot meet the evidentiary standards for a criminal charge, they have been known to charge brothel operators with regulatory violations with which they do not need victim cooperation. In 2022, 28% of brothels were closed in one prostitution district due to regulatory violations (see main text).

While some of these secondary charges clearly describe an occurrence of human trafficking or sexual exploitation (Art. 195, Art. 196), others are much more broad. For instance, despite Coercion (Art. 181) specifically being named by police at the Zurich Strichplatz Depot as a common secondary offense at the site (Battyany, S., & Koch, C., 2018), it has also been used in cases of cases of exploitative debt collection (Germano, E., n.d.) and even when environmental protestors blocked the entrance to a shopping center (Climate Cases Chart, 2019). There has been no increase in trafficking convictions for decades (see Appendix Table 3), despite this being named one of the primary goals in the Swiss National Action Plan (Federal Police, 2016). According to the US State Department:

*“Lenient sentencing, resulting in the majority of traffickers receiving fully suspended sentences or sentences of less than one year imprisonment, continued to undercut efforts to hold traffickers accountable, weakened deterrence, created potential security and safety concerns for victims, and was not reflective of the seriousness of the crime...”*

Convicted traffickers are much more likely to receive fully suspended sentences or imprisonment of less than one year (66%; US State Despartment, 2024) than other crimes of similar magnitude, such as rape (39%; US State Department, 2024) – clearly reflecting the normalization of commercial sexual exploitation in Switzerland.

There is no available sentencing data on any other trafficking related crime, however, from media reports (see Appendix Table 2), we can see the **majority of cases in association with human trafficking or commercial sexual exploitation of minors result in conditional sentences – meaning the convicted does not go to prison unless they reoffend – and fines**, allowing most to walk free even in egregious cases. Ultimately, we know very little about the true level of exploitation in Switzerland; however, we can be certain that very few perpetrators will face meaningful consequences.

**Appendix Table 1.**  
**Definitions of Swiss Trafficking-Related Offenses**

| Offense  | Definition  | Punishment  |
|--|---|---|
| Art. 182:<br>Trafficking in<br>human beings  | "Any person who as a supplier, intermediary or customer engages in the trafficking of a human being for the purpose of sexual exploitation, exploitation of his or her labour or for the purpose of removing an organ is liable to a custodial sentence or to a monetary penalty. The soliciting of a person for these purposes is equivalent to trafficking."  | 1) "liable to a custodial sentence or to a monetary penalty"<br>2) "If the victim is a minor or if the offender acts for commercial gain, the penalty is a custodial sentence of not less than one year."<br>3) "In every case, a monetary penalty must also be imposed."<br>4) "Any person who commits the act abroad is also guilty of an offence. Articles 5 and 6 apply." |
| Art. 195:<br>Encouraging<br>prostitution   | "Any person who<br>a. induces a minor into prostitution or<br>encourages a minor in his or her<br>prostitution with the intention of securing a<br>financial advantage<br>b. induces a person into prostitution by<br>exploiting his or her dependence or a<br>financial advantage,<br>c. restricts the freedom to act of a prostitute<br>by supervising him or her in the course of<br>his or her activities or by exercising control<br>over the location, time, volume or other<br>aspects of his or her work as a prostitute<br>or,<br>d. makes a person remain a prostitute<br>against his or her will..." | " a custodial sentence not exceeding ten<br>years or to a monetary penalty."  |
| Art. 196: Sexual<br>acts with minors<br>against payment                            | "Any person who carries out sexual acts<br>with a minor or induces a minor to carry out<br>such acts and who makes or promises<br>payment in return..."   | "...custodial sentence not exceeding three<br>years or to a monetary penalty."  |
| Art. 181: Coercion   | "Any person who, by the use of force or the<br>threat of serious detriment or other<br>restriction of another's freedom to act<br>compels another to carry out an act, to fail<br>to carry out an act or to tolerate an act..."   | "...custodial sentence not exceeding three<br>years or to a monetary penalty."  |
| Art. 193:<br>Exploitation of a<br>person in a<br>position of need or<br>dependency | "1 Any person who induces another to<br>commit or submit to a sexual act by<br>exploiting a position of need or a<br>dependent relationship based on<br>employment or another dependent<br>relationship.."  | "custodial sentence not exceeding three<br>years or to a monetary penalty.<br>2 If the person harmed is the spouse or<br>registered partner of the offender, the<br>responsible authority may dispense with<br>prosecution, referral to the court or the<br>imposition of a penalty."   |

Source. The Federal Assembly the Swiss Confederation. (2020). Swiss Criminal Code. p. 86, 87, 92 Note. "The Swiss authorities have indicated that legislative practice in Switzerland favours shorter definitions of offences with a view to allowing broader interpretation by the courts, rather than longer definitions with the risk of leaving an aspect out." GRETA (2015)

**Appendix Table 2.**  
**Available Media Reports and Case Outcomes**

| Case  | Year | Outcome  | Note  |
|---|------|--|---|
| A man in Winterthur purchased a 14-year-old girl on Snapchat. "...the <b>minor did not act on her own initiative</b> , but was part of an exploitation system...Underage girls are lured into prostitution by adults...The 14-year-old Winterthur is only one of the victims." (Keller, Hudec, 2023).   | 2024 | Seven months <b>conditional sentence</b><br><b>conditional fine</b> of "30 daily rates of CHF 50"<br>a ban on working with children  | "The judge justified the sentence as follows: 'The private plaintiff agreed and offered herself. Nor does she look like a child anymore. All of this speaks for the accused and lowers the punishment slightly....on the other hand... They knew that the injured party was a 14-year-old girl....'" (Wenzler, M., 2023). |
| A 60-year-old Hungarian woman was "offer[ing] two <b>underage prostitutes</b> ..." in her brothel in the Baden district. "Five suitors were convicted..." (Tages-Anzeiger, February 18, 2025).  | 2025 | Case against alleged trafficker ongoing  | "the public prosecutor's office accuses her of aggravated human trafficking and multiple acts of facilitating the prostitution of minors." They seek a "four-year prison sentence."   |
| A 44-year-old Swiss man, was charged with fee for sexual acts with minors in relation to the above case. He specifically asked for "an underage prostitute." (Tages-Anzeiger, February 18, 2025).   | 2025 | "He faces a <b>conditional prison sentence of eight months.</b> "  |   |
| "Five other brothel visitors have already been sentenced... including a <b>local politician</b> ...who is active in the local party in his community..." (Tages-Anzeiger, February 18, 2025).   | 2025 | Men received <b>"suspended sentences and fines of up to CHF 2,500."</b>  | The prosecutor claimed that due to the victims appearance and behavior the perpetrators should have known the victims were minors. At least one man "paid CHF 220 per visit for sex and another CHF 100 for intercourse without a condom."  |
| Two receptionists associated with the above case "convicted in summary proceedings for multiple counts of promoting prostitution." (Tages-Anzeiger, February 18, 2025).   | 2025 | Unknown  |   |
| A man bought <b>six underage girls, some of whom were addicted to drugs</b> , from a human trafficking ring. "The case before a Zurich court shows how ruthless the suitor and the pimps were." (Laglstorfer, R., 2024).  | 2024 | "42 months in prison for sex with underage girls"  |   |
| Peter A., 32, paid 800 CHF to a "Sugar daddy ring [sex trafficking ring of minors]" for " <b>hard sex</b> " with a <b>14 year old girl</b> . He hit her and "...strangled the 14-year-old with one hand for one to two minutes by pressing her down, because he "likes such things". He was charged with "having sex with a minor for a fee" (Laglstorfer, R., April 26, 2024). | 2024 | "... <b>suspended prison sentence of 16 months for a probationary period of two years.</b> "; "satisfaction [victim compensation] of 3000 francs; ban on working with minors |   |

|  |      |  |  |
|--|------|--|--|
| A man allegedly operated a “sugar daddy ring” with at least six victims between 14 and 17. “Several charges are pending against him and his colleagues...” (Blick, April 26, 2024).  | 2024 | As of April 26, 2024, the main accused was “at large”  |  |
| Jeevan F., 50, had “sex” repeatedly with a homeless 14-year old girl who he met on a Sugar Daddy app...“money was handed over after sexual intercourse.” Laglstorfer, R. There was no conviction for “exploiting an emergency” or Art. 196 (Laglstorfer, R. (Oct. 10, 2024), but a guilty verdict on multiple counts of “sexual acts with a child.”  | 2024 | <b>“conditional prison sentence of 11 months with a trial period of three years.”</b> ; ban on working with minors for life; CHF 5000 victim satisfaction.   | “It is indisputable for the judge that money was handed over after sexual intercourse. ‘However, there is no indication in the files that the accused had previously promised money for sex.’... The victim was “Disillusioned with the judgment” and “She didn’t feel taken seriously by the prosecutor. ‘I got the feeling that I was not a victim, but a perpetrator.” (Laglstorfer, R., October 10, 2024). |
| A 51-year-old Chinese citizen and her 58-year-old Swiss citizen partner, <b>who own five brothels</b> , were arrested for promoting illegal prostitution and violating the Foreign Nationals and Integration Act. They were alleged to have exploited “the plight of Chinese sex workers...the prostitutes were illegal in Switzerland – which the brothel owners tried to conceal...” They were allegedly charged CHF 2,000 deposits for using foreign IDs, plus CHF 600-1,000 monthly rent and 40% of their income in taxes. A 59-year-old secretary was also arrested as an accomplice. (Blick, Dec 17, 2024; Blick, May 8, 2024) | 2024 | Woman sentenced to <b>18-month suspended prison sentence</b><br><br>The man was not convicted<br><br>The secretary received a suspended fine<br><br>Women who sold sex in the country illegally (likely trafficking victims) were fined and deported |  |
| A suspected loverboy trafficker (23) exploited a <b>12 year old girl</b> who was “madly in love with him” and he and his six friends raped her, filming the mass rape...“The main suspect was convicted of 16 offenses...”, the most serious being human trafficking, rape and sexual acts with children...” He was sentenced in a juvenile court. (Blick., Oct, 31, 2024; Blick., Dec, 2, 2024).  | 2022 | The main suspect was sentenced to 8 years and 9 months in prison in 2022<br><br>His six friends were sentenced to <b>“conditional and sometimes unconditional prison terms....”</b>  | “...The case is a drastic example of a special form of abuse. Men, girls or women who are in love with them take advantage of them and manipulate them, make them addicted and exploit them. They often urge the victims to have sex with others ....”   |
| “A 32-year-old Spanish man is accused of running a prostitution network in Switzerland that exploited 20 women.” (SwissInfo, Sep. 28, 2023).   | 2023 | unknown  | “...made them [women] work illegally for his escort business. Several women were forced to hand over most of their income to him....The suspect, who remains in custody, has been charged with human trafficking, encouraging prostitution, and violating the law on foreigners and integration.”  |
| From 2014 to 2018, a “34-year-old woman had brought several young girls from Nigeria, some of whom were still minors, to work as prostitutes... enslaving them in Switzerland as sex workers using ‘juju’ magic threats.”  | 2018 | four-and-a-half years prison sentence;<br><br>She faces deportation after the sentence is completed  | “The Nigerian woman, herself a former trafficked sex worker, had worked with her partner, who had been sentenced to the same penalty in 2021, and members of her family, who had remained in Nigeria to recruit girls from poor areas.”  |

|  |      |   |   |
|--|------|---|---|
| Thai woman, 58, "was found guilty on <b>75 counts</b> of smuggling mostly poor and uneducated Thai women into the country... She was found guilty of numerous crimes including promotion of prostitution, money laundering, and human trafficking...Once brought into Switzerland they were then <b>forced to prostitute themselves in brothels</b> ... to pay their travel debts, which were billed at CHF 30,000 and to which were added board, lodging and advertising costs." (SwissInfo, 2020). | 2018 | 10 years prison sentence; fine of CHF 30 for 260 days   | "one of the biggest human trafficking cases in Switzerland....[She] had been running a complex, professionally structured and inhumane scheme in several regions of Switzerland between 2009 and 2014 when she was arrested." (SwissInfo, March 6, 2020). |
| A Romanian crime network recruited women in Romania and "forc[ed] them into prostitution" in Switzerland and elsewhere. Nine perpetrators and 15 victims were identified... The leader was arrested in Germany. One of the victims, an <b>18-year-old, was murdered by a sex buyer in Switzerland in 2016.</b> (SwissInfo, Oct. 7, 2020).  | 2020 | final outcome unknown<br><br>Assets were seized, "adding up to several million Swiss francs and including five houses, were confiscated."   |   |
| Two Swiss brothels were raided in 2007. "At least 23 women were found to be working under coercion." (O'Dea, C., 2014)   | 2007 | unknown   |   |
| "...six people were accused of a variety of offences relating to allegations that the women were forced to work as prostitutes in a Zurich brothel between February 2003 and February 2005...The prosecution proved five out of 74 alleged counts of human trafficking, which <b>carries a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison</b> , and 25 counts of living off immoral earnings against the brothel owner." (Allen, M., July 13, 2006)  | 2006 | The main accused was sentenced to 26 months prison but was released, due to serving two-thirds in pre-trial detention. Five other suspects received <b>suspended sentences of 1-18 months</b> for various offenses. |   |
| Hungarian woman (19) "lured to Switzerland and experienced sexual exploitation by a pair of pimps. Among other things, she had to endure violent sex practices and offer unprotected services – <b>even when she was very pregnant by a customer</b> " (Blick, Feb 26, 2024).  | 2023 | One perpetrator was convicted under Articles 182 and 195 (judgment pending appeal). Another operated from Hungary, beyond Swiss jurisdiction.   |   |

Note. In most of these cases, women are exploited in places of legal prostitution – not "underground"; Unconditional prison sentences seem reserved for cases where there are numerous offenses (i.e., human trafficking and rape) or numerous victims.

**Appendix Table 3.**  
**Human Trafficking Related Offenses and Convictions by Year**

| Year | Art. 182: Trafficking in human beings |            | Art. 195: Encouraging prostitution |            | Art. 196: Sexual acts with minors against payment |            |
|------|---------------------------------------|------------|------------------------------------|------------|---|------------|
|      | offense                               | conviction | offense                            | conviction | offense   | conviction |
| 2009 | 50                                    | 11         | 104                                | 25         | *   | *          |
| 2010 | 52                                    | 6          | 99                                 | 8          | *   | *          |
| 2011 | 45                                    | 10         | 69                                 | 15         | *   | *          |
| 2012 | 78                                    | 13         | 148                                | 20         | *   | *          |
| 2013 | 61                                    | 13         | 86                                 | 23         | *   | *          |
| 2014 | 46                                    | 15         | 69                                 | 35         | *   | *          |
| 2015 | 58                                    | 21         | 130                                | 30         | 8   | 3          |
| 2016 | 125                                   | 11         | 181                                | 15         | 30  | 8          |
| 2017 | 125                                   | 6          | 156                                | 12         | 17  | 10         |
| 2018 | 85                                    | 4          | 146                                | 21         | 19  | 12         |
| 2019 | 99                                    | 10         | 108                                | 12         | 23  | 9          |
| 2020 | 67                                    | 9          | 84                                 | 19         | 32  | 15         |
| 2021 | 71                                    | 13         | 59                                 | 25         | 43  | 14         |
| 2022 | 63                                    | 7          | 80                                 | 7          | 21  | 7          |
| 2023 | 74                                    | 8          | 79                                 | 13         | 51  | 8          |
| 2024 | 79                                    | -          | 112                                | -          | 34  | -          |

Data source. Federal Statistics Office. (2025). Federal Statistical Office. Criminal offences registered by the police according to the Swiss Criminal Code by canton, level of completion and level of detection. Retrieved April 9, 2025, from [https://www.pxweb.bfs.admin.ch/pxweb/en/px-x-1903020100\\_101/-/px-x-1903020100\\_101.px/](https://www.pxweb.bfs.admin.ch/pxweb/en/px-x-1903020100_101/-/px-x-1903020100_101.px/) ; Swiss Federal Statistical Office. (2024). Adults: convictions for an offense or crime according to articles of the Criminal Code (StGB), Switzerland and cantons <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/kriminalitaet-strafrecht/strafjustiz.assetdetail.31666718.html>

Note. Art. 196 was not a crime until 2014; data for 2024 convictions not available.

**Appendix Table 4.**  
**Secondary Offenses and Convictions by Year**

| Art. 193: Exploitation of a person in a position of need or dependency |         |            | Art. 181: Coercion |            |
|--|---------|------------|--------------------|------------|
| year   | offense | conviction | offense            | conviction |
| 2009   | 34      | 19         | 2,286              | 957        |
| 2010   | 29      | 8          | 2,005              | 915        |
| 2011   | 28      | 10         | 1,955              | 862        |
| 2012   | 27      | 6          | 2,193              | 979        |
| 2013   | 32      | 5          | 2,264              | 1,054      |
| 2014   | 32      | 9          | 2,201              | 1,045      |
| 2015   | 29      | 7          | 2,237              | 1,041      |
| 2016   | 19      | 5          | 2,497              | 1,105      |
| 2017   | 43      | 11         | 2,054              | 1,059      |
| 2018   | 19      | 7          | 2,233              | 1,102      |
| 2019   | 26      | 5          | 2,326              | 1,265      |
| 2020   | 24      | 10         | 2,843              | 1,215      |
| 2021   | 42      | 11         | 2,888              | 1,311      |
| 2022   | 24      | 8          | 2,765              | 1,533      |
| 2023   | 21      | 9          | 2,739              | 1,220      |
| 2024   | 41      | -          | 2,902              | -          |

Data source. Federal Statistics Office. (2025). Federal Statistical Office. Criminal offences registered by the police according to the Swiss Criminal Code by canton, level of completion and level of detection. Retrieved April 9, 2025, from [https://www.pxweb.bfs.admin.ch/pxweb/en/px-x-1903020100\\_101/-/px-x-1903020100\\_101.px/](https://www.pxweb.bfs.admin.ch/pxweb/en/px-x-1903020100_101/-/px-x-1903020100_101.px/) ; Swiss Federal Statistical Office. (2024). Adults: convictions for an offense or crime according to articles of the Criminal Code (StGB), Switzerland and cantons <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/kriminalitaet-strafrecht/strafjustiz.assetdetail.31666718.html>

Note. data for 2024 convictions not available.



## ABOUT NORDIC MODEL NOW!

Nordic Model Now! (NMN) is a secular feminist grassroots group campaigning for the abolition of prostitution and related practices, and for the Nordic Model approach to prostitution. NMN is run entirely by unpaid volunteers and receives no corporate or public funding and relies entirely on donations from supporters.

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