

In Loving Memory of Helga Konrad (1948 – 2024)



It is with great sadness that we have learnt about the sudden passing of Helga Konrad. She was a longstanding valued expert in the anti-trafficking field and an inspiration, an ally and friend of La Strada International and our members.

Dr. Helga Konrad was a former minister for women's issues and federal parliamentarian in Austria. From 2000 – 2004, she chaired the EU Stability Pact Task Force on Anti-Trafficking for Southeastern Europe and from 2004-2006, she was the OSCE's first Special Representative on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings. In 2006, she became an independent consultant and since 2010, the coordinator of the Regional Implementation Initiative, an anti-trafficking Think-Tank, for which the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe (IDM) has been acting as a supporting organisation.

Helga Konrad was ahead of her time. She was a fearless defender of human rights, women's rights and a tireless advocate for social justice. For the last 25 years, she has been encouraging European countries, including in Southeastern Europe, to show their commitment, by taking a strong response to the fight against Human Trafficking.

After the adoption of the Palermo Protocol in 2000 – she was present at the negotiations like several of our members - she strongly highlighted the need to enhance and extend legislation, next to adequate national policies and action plans to address all the dimensions of human trafficking – including trafficking for labour exploitation, domestic servitude, in line with the UN definition.

Furthermore, she called upon governments to establish strong national coordination and referral mechanisms; as well as independent National Rapporteurs and multi-disciplinary working groups or task forces, at a time when this hardly existed. She reminded everyone to take into account the special assistance and protection needs of victims and promoted a human rights-based approach. She believed in rights and justice for all, including refugees and migrants that are undocumented, or working irregularly or in informal sectors. She also strongly supported a sex workers rights approach.

In all this work, she has always promoted the role of NGOs. She encouraged governments to institutionalise cooperation with civil society and to ensure that anti-trafficking NGOs have a role in NRMs and NAPs, especially to guarantee victim's assistance and protection. With the Stability Pact, she met NGOs during her country visits to the region, which showed recognition for their work. She was also instrumental in the founding of LEFÖ-IBF, our member in Austria.

During her OSCE mandate, she established the OSCE Alliance Against Trafficking in Persons, a broad international forum including international, non-governmental, and inter-governmental organisations, aiming to develop effective joint strategies and driving advocacy with States. An Alliance that still exists today.

We worked with her since she was appointed to chair the EU Stability Pact Anti-Trafficking Task Force. As a member of our advisory board from 2005 - 2008, and before and afterward, she supported our strategies and advocacy work, including around new EU legislation and our call for strengthening victims' rights, including victims' access to unconditional support, non-punishment and remedies.

She was a critical thinker and demanded the same from all relevant actors. She was averse to political jargon, and instead asked to reflect on the real problems and to suggest concrete, possible solutions.

This month, on 4 October, she organised her last think tank expert meeting 'Countering the Toxic Interface of Migration, Human Trafficking & Related Labour Exploitation 2.0, at the Austrian Trade Union Federation. Many experts in the anti-trafficking field, with whom she had worked for years, were present that day. As usual, she moderated the event with flair, with critical reflections, thought-provoking questions and calls to action. It was clear that she remained dedicated to continuing her work, and still had many plans and ideas to promote justice for all.

Unfortunately, there was no more time. Helga Konrad died on 12 October 2024, at the age of 76. She leaves an empty space in the field and will be greatly missed by us all. We are grateful for her legacy and thank her for her endless fight against human trafficking and her strong support of civil society.