



CENTRAL INFORMATION NETWORK OF  
AUTONOMOUS WOMEN'S SHELTERS

[www.autonome-frauenhaeuser-zif.de](http://www.autonome-frauenhaeuser-zif.de)

INDEPENDENT

FEMINIST

GRASSROOTS DEMOCRATIC

## VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN GERMANY

The first representative study of the living conditions, safety and health of women in Germany (2004) confirmed the 1970s' estimates of feminists about the level of violence against women. According to the survey commissioned by the German Federal Government, 37% of the interviewed women had experienced physical violence after the age of 16. **ABOUT 25% HAD SUFFERED UNDER VARIOUS FORMS OF PHYSICAL OR SEXUAL VIOLENCE INFLICTED UPON THEM BY CURRENT OR PREVIOUS PARTNERS.** As a consequence of such violence, 64% of the affected women incurred physical injuries. A study from the year 2014 of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) shows that the extent of violence against women hasn't diminished. Violence against women still is an unsolved social problem marring the well-being of countless women and children.

## EVERY WOMAN RULES HER OWN LIFE

Autonomous women's shelters are havens of safety and refuge for women and children affected by violence. They are safe places created and designed by women for women. Here, women and children can find peace and quiet to come to terms with their situation and get support in taking decisions for the future. The work of the autonomous women's shelters is characterised by respecting **THE RIGHT**

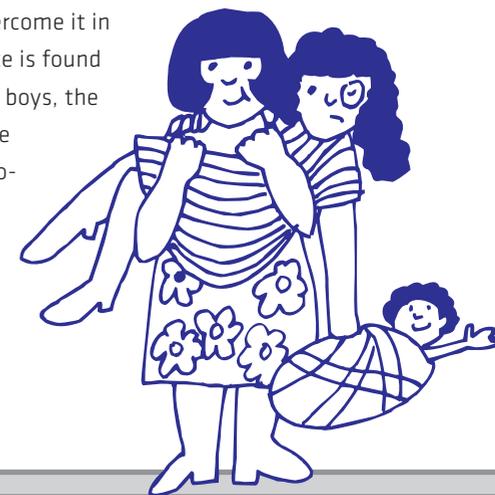
**OF EVERY SINGLE WOMAN TO MAKE HER OWN DECISIONS AS WELL AS FOSTERING SOLIDARITY, EMPOWER WOMEN AND HELP THEM TO HELP THEMSELVES.**

For safety reasons, the addresses of these shelters are usually kept secret. Within the shelter, women are themselves fully responsible for their everyday lives together with their children. Professional support strengthens them to cope with the violence they were subjected to and assists them in developing new perspectives for their lives. To overcome violence against women an effective strategy is needed. For the immediate safety of all women and children affected by violence the easy, free of charge, non-bureaucratic entry and accessibility to safe havens must be granted as well as getting appropriate assistance and empowerment.

## PRIVATE MATTERS ARE POLITICAL ISSUES

Advocacy work and political campaigns for gender justice and against gender-based violence are crucial tasks of the autonomous women's shelters. **NOT ONLY DO THEY AIM AT PUTTING THE ISSUE OF PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN ON THE POLITICAL AGENDA, THEY ALSO WANT TO COMBAT THE DAY-TO-DAY STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN** and overcome it in

a sustainable manner. Structural violence is found in the differing socialisation of girls and boys, the unequal pay for women and men and the perpetuation of out-dated gender stereotypes. Autonomous women's shelters monitor all related developments very carefully and intervene in public debates, bringing in a specifically feminist perspective.



## WOMEN'S RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS

The steps taken by German authorities against gender-based violence have been rather haphazard so far, lacking a clear concept for action. The autonomous women's shelters advocate for the implementation of international treaties on women's rights. Prominent amongst these are the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the so called "Istanbul Convention" (Council of Europe Treaty No. 210), which, for the first time, outlines a coordinated strategy of action on violence against women.

## COORDINATION OF NETWORKING – ONLY TOGETHER ARE WE STRONG!

In Germany, there are about 350 women's shelters at present run by a variety of community agencies and charity organisations. More than one third of them call themselves autonomous women's shelters and are committed to relevant guidelines. They are independent, non-profit, non-denominational, non-governmental organisations with no links to any political party. **THE COORDINATING AGENCY FOR THESE AUTONOMOUS SHELTERS IS THE "ZENTRALE INFORMATIONSSTELLE AUTONOMER FRAUENHÄUSER" (ZIF)**

– Central Information Network of Autonomous Women's Shelters. The ZIF was founded in 1980 during the 8th national gathering of women's shelters' representatives in Braunschweig.



At a time when women's shelters were still in their initial phase, the central information network took up the tasks of gathering and proving information as well as networking and coordination. By then, the various initiatives for setting up women's shelters could already look back on a short but intense history. Encouraged by the experiences made in other countries, similar initiatives emerged in numerous West German cities with the aim of setting up self-governed autonomous women's shelters. **THE FIRST SHELTERS OPENED IN BERLIN IN OCTOBER 1976 AND IN COLOGNE ONE MONTH LATER. BOTH PROJECTS WERE PIONEERED BY THE NEW WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN THE WEST OF GERMANY.**

During this founding period, it became a vital task for the newly created ZIF to advise women's initiative groups and support them with setting up new women's shelters.

Furthermore, the ZIF provided the necessary network and platform for the exchange of information amongst the diverse women's shelters and initiatives. All this was crucial for strengthening and empowering the women's shelters' movement. Decisions, for example on national funding appeals, were taken jointly during the annual conferences of all women's shelters. In the early 1990s, the ZIF supported the newly founded women's shelters in former East Germany. Over a decade, regular East-West-conferences of women's shelters were taking place.



## THE ZIF

The ZIF is exclusively financed by contributions from the autonomous women's shelters plus other donations. The financial independence of governmental funding agencies secures its political freedom. **THE ZIF IS ALWAYS AFFILIATED TO ONE PARTICULAR WOMEN'S SHELTER FOR A CERTAIN PERIOD OF TIME, GUIDED BY THE PRINCIPLE OF ROTATION.** The ZIF is elected by the member organisations for a minimum of three years and a maximum of nine years. This limit is set to avoid a permanent concentration of power whilst losing touch with the grass roots. All ZIF representatives do not only work for the organisation, but they also do practical work within their affiliated women's shelter in order to keep close contact to the field.

### **THE TASKS AND DUTIES OF THE ZIF WERE EXPANDED OVER THE YEARS.**

At present, it's mandate is focused on lobbying and advocacy work in cooperation with the Coordination Committee of Autonomous Women's Shelters. This Coordination Committee comprises of delegates from the various women's shelter organisations based in the Federal States of Germany as well as delegates from the topical working groups of the women's shelter movement. The Committee decides upon the focal points of action and supports the work of the ZIF.

Apart from its day-to-day operational duties and the national coordination of networking efforts, the ZIF organises conferences, campaigns and capacity-building events.

It advocates for women's rights, promotes awareness-raising initiatives and lobbies for adequate legislation. It also represents the autonomous women's shelters on various national boards and panels. These include the advisory board of the nationwide support hotline for women subjected to violence or the German Women's Council (Deutscher Frauenrat). At European level, the ZIF is part of the network WAVE (Women Against Violence Europe).

**THE ZIF IS A SUCCESSFUL MODEL FOR SUSTAINABLE NETWORKING, COORDINATION AND AWARENESS-RAISING ADVOCACY GUIDED BY THE PRINCIPLES OF GRASS-ROOT DEMOCRACY.**



