



‘When I help her, I also help myself’: peer support in anti-trafficking work

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I am a resilience trainer and a survivor of human trafficking. I joined the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in April 2025 as a Safety and Legal Protection Officer. Since then, I have run peer-to-peer sessions in refugee accommodation centres in Baden-Württemberg, in south-west Germany. We talk about resilience and we experience the power of community together. To help prevent (re-)trafficking, we also discuss human trafficking, how to recognise the signs of exploitation and which legal rights and counselling services exist. Participants are refugees and asylum seekers who are at risk of trafficking, or who have experienced it in the past. This article is a personal reflection on that work, written to make peer support approaches more visible to other anti-trafficking practitioners in Europe.

The roots of my approach

The peer-to-peer approach I use builds on the work of the Women's Information Centre (Fraueninformationszentrum, FIZ). This Stuttgart-based counselling centre provides psychosocial support to migrant and refugee women affected by gender-based violence, persecution, domestic abuse and trafficking. FIZ was among the specialist services in Germany that developed and documented a structured peer-to-peer model with refugee women affected by trafficking.¹

In 2018, FIZ launched the Multiplier Peer Support Project, in which I took part. This initiative was designed for refugee women from a range of African countries, among them Nigeria, Ghana and Cameroon. It trained women who had survived trafficking to become peer multipliers and to support other trafficked women through outreach and assistance.²

We then completed a three-weekend-long training programme covering trauma management, resilience, women's rights and asylum procedures. That knowledge enabled us to identify, engage and support other women affected by trafficking within our own communities and languages. As survivors, we are in a distinctive position: we understand something of what others have lived through, we can offer initial emotional support, and we can refer our peers to further services.

Building on the FIZ model, we now run peer-to-peer sessions at the IRC within the Lichtblicke project, in cooperation with SOLWODI, another specialist counselling service in Germany.³ A second facilitator and I are running survivor-led awareness sessions until August 2027 in eight refugee accommodation centres in southern Germany. Lichtblicke is co-funded by the European Union through the national programme of the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF).

Session design

The sessions I design cover psychoeducation, resilience and self-care. Movement is central to our time together: I work with simple, accessible exercises drawn from dance and yoga. Later sessions also make space for prevention and the signs of human trafficking. Each session runs between 1.5 and 2.5 hours. The formats are participatory. They reflect the interests of the group, and we agree the focus of the content together.

Groups are made up of four to eight participants who live in the centre where the activity takes place. The sessions bring together people from different cultures, languages and genders. The group is open to anyone aged 16 and over, although individual sessions are aimed specifically at women or at men.

POSSIBLE TOPICS FOR AN EIGHT-PART PEER-TO-PEER SERIES

- 1 Getting to know each other.** Meet one another and co-create group agreements involving confidentiality, respect, no pressure to share and the right to pass. Introduce a game in which participants look for common ground, such as 'My favourite', an exercise adapted from an activity originally designed for children.⁴ Close by previewing the sessions ahead and asking what people would like to cover, using visual aids when language is a barrier.
- 2 Shine within: a make-up class.** A guided make-up session that emphasises self-expression, body awareness and personal empowerment. Facilitate conversations during the activity around the body as a space of dignity, creativity and personal choice. Music, tea and snacks help to create an informal and cosy environment.
- 3 Staying safe.** This is an info session on human trafficking and exploitation, its indicators, and the methods traffickers use to recruit in Germany. Make sure to cover victims' rights and the local support available, which participants can later share within their own communities.
- 4 Swimming excursion.** A women-only trip to a swimming pool nearby. In the shallow end, try out mindfulness and breathing exercises.⁵ Participants can also glide through the water with pool noodles and kickboards if available.
- 5 Move and dance.** Mindful movement exercises turn into a dance class in which there are no right or wrong steps. The aim is for participants to feel at home in their bodies while listening to lively music, shaking off stress and enjoying themselves together. Facilitate a reflection after dancing in which participants are invited to share other activities and moments that create aliveness and joy for them.
- 6 Words and stories of strength.** As a group, collect words for positive affirmations. As a next step, use prompts such as 'What helped you through difficult moments in your life?' and 'What do you wish someone had told you earlier?' to invite participants to share how they overcame challenges in the past, drawing on internal and external resources.
- 7 Staying safe for men.** The same as session 3, but focused on men and on forms of exploitation they more commonly face, such as labour exploitation in sectors like construction and agriculture. When addressing labour exploitation, also discuss employment rights and available support.
- 8 Closing picnic.** Outdoors, invite the participants to reflect on their time together and on what they take away from the conversations and activities. To celebrate, everyone can bring food and drinks to this session, which can be shared among the group.

Tip: Any session should open with check-in questions that take the temperature of the group or surface expectations. In one check-in activity that I call 'My superpower today', participants name one strength they bring into that day's session, either verbally or by drawing it on paper and presenting it in pairs or to the whole group. The drawings can then be hung on the wall as a group collage.⁶

Overcoming challenges

Not every participant feels comfortable expressing themselves verbally, and language barriers can slow conversations down during a peer-to-peer activity. To create other ways to communicate, I encourage participants to draw, write a single word on paper, or share an object that holds personal meaning. I also let people use their phones to translate my voice when I introduce an activity, so they can be confident they fully understand what will happen next.

Participants sometimes choose to pass on a particular topic. That should always be respected and nobody should be obliged to share personal experiences. The opposite can happen too: a few participants may dominate a discussion. In those cases, I actively ask quieter participants for their view and invite them into the conversation. When we talk about our own biographies, some discussions touch on painful experiences and can trigger difficult memories. After emotionally demanding sessions, I offer follow-up conversations and reach out to participants individually to hear whether they need additional support.

What has surprised me most so far is the resilience I have witnessed. Even participants who have been through very hard experiences often find strength in supporting one another: by sharing information, by offering an open ear, by being a helping hand in daily life in the refugee accommodation centres. When I asked them about their mutual support, participants told me that being able to help someone else gives them a sense of agency, and that it was an empowering experience. As one participant put it in that conversation: 'When I help her, I also help myself.' For me, that captures the essence of peer support and the power such a group can unfold.

Bringing peer support into your own context

The response to our sessions has been encouraging, and our next step in 2027 is to train sixteen people with lived experience as peer multipliers in two in-person courses. They will first shadow our sessions and then run their own, so that the groups can continue in the centres after the project ends. Beyond that, the peer approach transfers to other groups and topics, such as mental health or parenting. Five suggestions for anyone considering it within the context of human trafficking prevention and protection:

Identify capable peer facilitators

Recruitment should ensure that facilitators who are themselves survivors of trafficking have had good experiences of being supported by others, and are no longer at risk from trafficking networks. Psychological stability is central: facilitators need to be able to hold the space during a session. They should also be trained in conversation skills and in recognising and managing signs of stress and trauma.⁷

Start with a pilot group

There is no need to begin with a large programme. A single pilot group that meets a couple of times for an hour each can be enough to build first connections, and it allows facilitators to learn from the experience and have time to adapt to what participants need. The list of topics on page four can be used as a draft curriculum.

Build safety first

Before meaningful conversations can develop, participants need to experience the group as safe. That means agreeing on confidentiality at the outset and making sure nobody is obliged to share personal experiences. Respecting cultural backgrounds, personal boundaries and different ways of communicating is essential. For some thematic sessions, participants may feel more comfortable taking part in a single-gender group. Dividing the group can be an option, provided that the peer-to-peer activities as a whole give equal attention to the lived realities of all participants across gender and sexual orientation.

Work with resources, not deficits

Facilitators should avoid trying to 'fix' participants or pushing them to share difficult experiences. The aim is not to overcome traumatic experiences. It is to draw out the strengths and common ground in the group, to build positive relationships, to make room for fun and lightness, and to offer orientation in order to prevent (re-)trafficking.

Reflect and adjust

Peer support requires continuous reflection and adaptation. After each session, facilitators should consider whether participants felt safe and included, if anyone may need a follow-up conversation, and what could be improved. At the IRC, we also draw on professional supervision, reflecting on group dynamics and our own responses with a trained counsellor.

Conclusion

Peer support means support between people who share a similar experience. In this case, it means survivors of trafficking facilitating groups for other survivors and people at risk of exploitation. It is neither therapy nor case management, and it does not replace specialist counselling. In practice, the sessions combine movement, creative and conversational formats with awareness-raising input on recruitment methods, rights and available support in order to prevent (re-)trafficking.

Facilitators need to be psychologically stable, no longer at risk from trafficking networks, and trained in conversation skills and in recognising signs of stress and trauma. Regular supervision matters, both for facilitators' own self-care and for quality assurance. Where these conditions are met, and where peer-to-peer activities are embedded in a wider structure – an accommodation centre, a counselling service, a community group – there is a good case for other anti-trafficking practitioners in Europe to take up the approach and pilot it in their own settings.

ANTI-TRAFFICKING AT IRC DEUTSCHLAND

IRC Deutschland has been running anti-trafficking projects nationally and across Europe since January 2022. Its work follows the 4P framework of prevention, protection, prosecution and partnership, with European projects concentrating on prevention and delivering protection through partnerships with specialised counselling services. Currently, three projects are being implemented: Lichtblicke, TIES and REACH. Detailed information on all current and previous projects can be found at: <https://www.rescue.org/de/land/deutschland/schutz-rechtsberatung>.

Footnotes

- 1** An overview of the peer support projects in Germany can be found on the website of the German NGO Network against Trafficking in Human Beings (KOK), the national umbrella organisation for specialist counselling centres on human trafficking: <https://www.kok-gegen-menschenhandel.de/peer-projekte>.
- 2** Fraueninformationszentrum (FIZ), Handreichung für ein Peer-to-Peer Projekt mit geflüchteten Frauen* und anderen Zielgruppen [Guide for a Peer-to-Peer Project with Refugee Women* and Other Target Groups], Stuttgart, 2020, https://www.vij-wuerttemberg.de/sites/default/files/2020-06/200615_handreichung_mps_web.pdf.
- 3** For further information on the Lichtblicke project, see: <https://www.rescue.org/de/projekt/schutz-rechtsberatung/lichtblicke>.
- 4** International Rescue Committee, Social-Emotional Learning Intervention: Games Bank, Safe Healing and Learning Spaces Toolkit, 2016, 'My favorite', p. 70, <https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/2023-02/IRC%20SEL%20Games%20Bank%20v2.pdf>.
- 5** International Rescue Committee, Mindfulness Moments: A5 Cards, 2023, https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/Mindfulness%20Moments_A5%20Cards_v1.pdf.
The cards were written for educational settings, but the techniques transfer readily to work with adults and can be adapted to the group and the space.
- 6** International Rescue Committee Deutschland, Healing Classrooms: Sichere Orte für gemeinsames Lernen. Praxishandbuch für pädagogische Fachkräfte [Healing Classrooms: Safe Spaces for Learning Together. A Practical Handbook for Educators], Berlin, 2024, 'Patchwork', p. 111, https://mehr-teilhabe.de/wp-content/uploads/IRC_Healing_Classrooms_Web_240812.pdf.
- 7** FIZ provides a useful guide for recruitment interviews with peer facilitators in the context of human trafficking. See: Fraueninformationszentrum (FIZ), Handreichung für ein Peer-to-Peer Projekt mit geflüchteten Frauen* und anderen Zielgruppen [Guide for a Peer-to-Peer Project with Refugee Women* and Other Target Groups], Stuttgart, 2020, pp. 26–29, https://www.vij-wuerttemberg.de/sites/default/files/2020-06/200615_handreichung_mps_web.pdf.

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