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***The Traffic in Gagauz Moldovan Women to Turkey: Experience and Impact in Moldova***

**Topic of Research**

In the past 10 years, the migration of women from Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth Independent States (CIS) has increased dramatically. As a result, there has been a proliferation of counter-trafficking initiatives by governmental and non-governmental organizations, most notably by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). While these organizations admit that total numbers of referrals of trafficked women has *decreased* consistently since 2001-2, they also insist that trafficking of women persists and has extended to new areas. One of the latest routes identified is between Moldova and Turkey. As the poorest country in Europe and with one third of its population working abroad, Moldova is the latest source of the women in traffic. Turkey, while known best as the provider of guest workers for Germany, has become a recipient of illegal female labor migrants from formerly socialist states – most recently, Moldova. New data suggests that while women are increasingly aware of the risks of trafficking, they are willing to take that risk to travel abroad. Moreover, the profiles of the “trafficking victim” have diversified. For instance, there are now more women in their 30s being trafficked for work that does not necessarily involve sexual services, but may include domestic labor and begging. Even if they are prostituted, the conditions of their travel and labor have improved. Women thus may have longer stays in countries of destination. It continues to be the case that many women do not identify as victims. The IOM argues that it is *not* that trafficking has decreased, but that traffickers tactics have changed, and the phenomenon has become less visible and thus harder to detect.

This project analyzes why and how the phenomenon and the conceptualization of trafficking in women is shifting. In order to understand these shifts, I argue that it is key to look at the wider phenomenon of female irregular labor migrants from Moldova. I focus upon Moldovan women of the Turkic Gagauz ethnicity, wives and mothers in their 30s, who voluntarily use illegal networks to commute to work as domestics in Turkey. The women from this category who do fall into trafficking currently constitute the majority of cases assisted by the IOM-Moldova. My project is a comprehensive dissertation research study of this irregular labor migration in Moldova and Turkey from June 2004 – August 2005. The portion of the project funded by IREX took place between Sept. and Dec. 2004 and was an ethnographic study of the experience, motivations, and impact of irregular labor migration from the perspective of the women and their families. This project also gathered data about trafficking and the policy responses to it in Moldova.

## **Relevance and Contribution to Field**

Much of what is traditionally known about “women in traffic” is extrapolated from a narrow subset of irregular migrants: individual young women forced into sex work. However, more recently, scholars, activists, and policy-makers alike argue that most “women in traffic” migrate voluntarily for various kinds of work to help their families survive. They have called for a wider framework that sees trafficking in women as part of new irregular, and feminized, migration patterns. These patterns are a result of global political and economic transformations affecting labor supply and demand in both source and destination countries.

According to scholars, such global transformations disproportionately affect women in developing countries and have prompted their migration in increasing numbers. These women try to ensure the survival of their households by using combinations of legal and illegal methods to find short-term work abroad. In so doing, they fulfill demands in other countries for workers in the sex or entertainment industry, traders, or domestic workers. Typically, female migrants “commute” internationally to labor for months at a time and return home regularly to care for their families. These women are at risk of being trafficked. This new irregular and feminized labor movement represents a significant shift from traditional migration in Europe, which brought men from former colonies and other developing nations to work in Western and Northern Europe. Later, these men sent for their families or married locally and settled in these nations. While previous scholarship looked at the impact of emigration in the home country, it focused more closely on the assimilation and acculturation of immigrants and their children in the host country.

The impact of the irregular and feminized migration from post Cold War Eastern Europe is qualitatively different. These women return frequently. Thus, the home country remains materially and physically integral to their lives. The conditions of poverty in these homes motivate them to continue to migrate, despite the hardships and risks of trafficking. Moreover, their back and forth movements continue to impact these households both positively and negatively.

To understand this new type of back and forth, and feminized, migration pattern in Europe and the persistence of trafficking, my project expands current research in two key ways. First, I investigate the experiences and perspectives of the women who continually and voluntarily use trafficking networks to migrate for work. Second, I concentrate equally on both the source and destination countries. To understand their motivations, it is crucial to investigate family’s conditions in the “source” country, and the impact of migration on households. Only by investigating women’s experiences, motivations and the impact on their own households, in addition to studying them in their destination, can we begin to explain what makes the use of illegal labor migration feasible, routine, and necessary for these women. If we can do this, we may direct better policy initiatives that will help these women and stem trafficking. Because of the difficulty of access to vulnerable irregular migrants, their employers, and traffickers, and the logistical difficulties of multi-sited research, there is little empirical data that fulfills these two new tasks.

### **Approach and research methodology; list of research sites**

This research study used a combination of participant-observation and informal and formal interviews with individuals in Gagauz Moldovan village households and with officials from governmental and non-governmental organizations. My primary research took place in Gagauz households located outside of Komrat, the capital of Gagauzia. Gagauzia is a region in Southern Moldova, which was granted autonomous status from the Moldovan state in 1995. The population is ethnic Gagauz and Christian Orthodox. While some speak Moldovan, they primarily communicate in the Turkic Gagauz language and Russian. I did not limit myself to these households, but examined conditions also in workplaces and schools.

My research took place in 4 different villages, and focused on 4 different households at different stages of the migration cycle (one in which a woman was about to leave for Turkey, one in which a woman was absent, one in which she had just returned, and one in which the woman had returned over 1 year ago). I conducted over 30 formal interviews and many informal interviews with women who had been to Turkey and others (including husbands, children, and parents) and surveyed conditions in the entire village and region. By staying in these villages myself, I gained first-hand experience of the practical conditions of their lives and detailed descriptions of their daily activities. The second site included organizations involved in policy efforts to counter-trafficking or to assist women and families. These included IREX, the Moldovan Migration Department, Contact (Gagauzia), two local children's centers, TIKA (Turkish Business Association) and, primarily, the IOM. From them, I gathered further information on trafficking and the conditions of women in Moldova, observed ongoing projects and media campaigns for women and children, and discussed with them their proposed projects. At the IOM, I observed information campaigns for local high school students, IOM efforts at organizing local NGO and government cooperation on counter-trafficking, and interviewed the heads of the migration management, counter-trafficking and information campaign divisions.

### **Research findings and preliminary conclusions**

Gagauz Moldovan women are part of a wide array of female migrants from Eastern Europe and the CIS who migrate illegally to Turkey. Many of these migrants are Turkic-speaking women who come to Istanbul for sex work, to buy and sell goods, and/or to labor as domestics. Gagauz Moldovan women use illegal networks to travel to Turkey to work caretakers for homes, children, the sick, and/or the elderly, usually for six months at a time. They enter with tourist visas that expire after one month. Fees for crossing the border with an expired tourist visa increase after 6 months. Therefore, these women usually try to leave the country before six months and re-enter shortly thereafter. These domestics are valued by the Turkish middle class because, unlike local domestic labor, they seek a live-in situation and can be paid less, and they are perceived as more "European" and "civilized." As a result, Turkish employment agencies seek Moldovans out to employ them. There are three main reasons they come to Turkey, as opposed to other destinations. First, while they may want to go to Western Europe, where wages are high, increasingly strict immigration controls make it next to impossible to gain entry. Second, they speak a Turkic language, Gagauz. Third, Moldova and Turkey are relatively close, which facilitates back and forth movement. The women do not want to

move to Turkey permanently, but seek to remain easily mobile between Turkey and their homes. While many are employed in Moldova, their jobs pay less than \$50/month. In Turkey, they earn, on average, \$300/month, working illegally. Most domestic work in Turkey, even by locals, is not contracted or legal work. These women's domestic work in Istanbul may involve various levels of abuse. Most abuse they cite is psychological, but some also indicated that their freedom of movement was restricted, they were not paid and/or not given time off, and they were treated poorly. On the other hand, some women explained they had a very good situation of employment and established long-term working relationships with their employers or with Turkish employment agencies. Sometimes, employers pay for their trips back home and fines for overstayed visas, and some even offered health care and social service benefits.

These women's voluntary engagement in irregular labor migration responds to poverty and unemployment in Moldova, though I found several cases where domestic abuse in their homes also played a role in their decision to leave, or to leave again. This migrant labor is seasonal and takes place primarily in the winter months. Many have farms in Moldova and return to work on them in the summer. They leave their children in the care of their husbands, sisters, or mothers. Some also travel to Russia, with their husbands, to work in construction. These families argue that migrating for work is one of very few routes to survival for households. Migration has become part of the cycle of life for families. Most families have at least one immediate family member who is abroad in Turkey or Russia. Remittances are used to pay debts from hospital stays or house repairs, weddings, and/or university education. While families have become dependant financially on this labor migration, they are also in dire conditions as a result of it. For the most part, gender roles within these households remain traditional. However, even if unusual, some men have taken on tasks in the household that are traditionally related to women's work. However, over time, some couples split up, marry foreigners, and remain abroad. With a mother in Turkey, and a father in Russia, children are sometimes left to care for themselves; if they are lucky, they are cared for by elderly family members, but this is more than often insufficient. These children are at high risk of being trafficked.

These migrant women have responded in various ways, some legal and some illegal, to new laws that attempt to decrease illegal migration to Turkey. For instance, those who know about it, take advantage of their ability to receive a 3-month extension of their visas or to apply, with their employer, for a work visa. A relatively new Turkish law states that one cannot re-enter Turkey for the amount of time that one has overstayed their visa. As a result, women are coming to Turkey less often. On the other hand, many women find new illegal routes to return to Turkey quickly. According to my data, then, there is a decline in irregular labor migration to Turkey by Gagauz Moldovans – and a related decline in trafficking situations. According to IOM data, the decline in numbers of women assisted or referred as victims of trafficking is due to the success of counter-trafficking programs, to the fact that much of trafficking has become less visible, because there are fewer police raids, and a lack of good referral systems. According to my data, there is a decrease in both the irregular labor migration and trafficking because individual women have responded to new laws and have *themselves* learned routes abroad and ways to find work illegally without going through intermediaries. "Travel and employment services" provided by agencies – some of

whom are criminals who then traffic women, according to the IOM – are no longer employed by these women in the same way. They are less dependent on these transnational intermediaries. Instead, they often have created, over time, individual and regularized relationships with employers or employment agencies for domestic workers in Turkey, whom they trust. Whereas before women may have used a service in Gagauzia that provided travel and employment services, now they may still go to the same service, but only to buy a plane ticket. This does not mean that there are no abuses taking place – some still end up trafficked and exploited. And indeed, as the IOM states, these interactions are harder to detect. What's more, even if they are not trafficked, there are other severe migrant, labor, and human rights abuses taking place in these interactions. There is great need to educate women on their migrant, labor, and human rights, as well as a demand for positive legal measures which would make it easier to go to Turkey to work and which would provide for their rights. Such measures would greatly undercut the supply of victims for traffickers'.

### **Future research agendas**

Having built up knowledge of these individuals and communities through extended contact with them on the ground, I acquired an intimate and rich understanding of the lives they lead, their complex motivations, and the multi-dimensional impact of irregular migration. Such information on these vulnerable populations is not accessible through formal surveys and quantitative studies. This qualitative ethnographic data, including the narratives of women themselves, can contribute to the depth of knowledge on irregular migration and trafficking. This kind of long-term and in-depth ethnographic research of “at risk” populations is precisely what we need in order to better understand why they continue to travel and migrate illegally for work, why and how they may get caught in trafficking networks, and to better address their needs through policy directives.

To fully understand this type of irregular labor migration of women, it is also absolutely essential to conduct transnational research. In particular, we need to conduct much more research on Moldova a source, and Turkey as a new country of destination for migrants of all kinds. We need to focus both on the impact of their migration and remittances on their family conditions at home, and the men and children left behind in the source country, as well as their work conditions and lives in the destination. Next, I would recommend an ethnographic study of the NGO projects and individuals involved in these projects. The relatively new field of the anthropology of policy could help us to better understand the conditions under which and structures in which policymakers themselves work. If we understood this, we could assess how international agendas such as “counter-trafficking” are translated into local projects with local interests, like those at the IOM-Moldova or IOM-Turkey. Doing so would help us to make recommendations as to how these organizations, among others, could work constructively together and internationally.

### **Policy recommendations**

- In-depth and long-term research on populations at highest risk of being trafficked; namely, irregular labor migrants and rural women and children. This would include research on the “root causes” and consequences of irregular migration

and trafficking, and an assessment of local needs as expressed in women's perspectives.

- Give priority to transnational research that seeks to understand trafficking conditions in both source and destination countries.
- Design economic and social assistance programs targeted for "at risk" populations, with priority on legal and sustainable employment possibilities at home or abroad
- Underwrite a programs for women who have migrated to form their own associations to provide information and support to other potential "at risk" populations.
- Foster grassroots information campaigns regarding labor migration abroad, employment possibilities at home, and migrant, labor, and human rights.
- Maintain assistance programs in Moldova that are attentive to local language needs (whether Russian or Moldovan).