



## **Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program**

### **Research Report**

*The opinions, recommendations, and conclusions of the grantee are his/her own and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IREX or the US Department of State.*

Ingrida Platais  
School of Social Work  
Columbia University  
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Georgia

#### **Empowerment through Civil and Social Action: Discrimination against Sex Workers in Georgia**

##### **Topic of Research**

The purpose of my research was to examine discrimination against female sex workers who lack legal and economic resources to protect their rights as citizens of Georgia and, at the same time, are subjected to poverty and violence, loss of social status and stigmatization. Since 1990, Georgia has endured economic changes which, fueled by ethnic conflicts and civil wars, lead to over 80% of the population living below poverty line. With deteriorating economic and social conditions, many women turned to survival sex work to provide financially for themselves and their families.

Recent anti-trafficking efforts by the U.S. and international community lead to the establishment of measures to enforce prosecution, protection, and prevention programs and policies. Such policies include the protection of human rights of trafficking victims and the assistance for their physical, psychological, and social recovery. Furthermore, programs to reintegrate victims of trafficking back to the society are widely encouraged. Although not all sex workers may be in need of

reintegration to the society, services provided for them are limited to health education, HIV/AIDS infection prevention, health and psychological services.

### **Relevance and Contribution to Field**

This pilot project is important to social work, public health, and gender rights for several reasons. It will provide a holistic overview of the factors that contribute to survival sex work. The identification of these factors can lead to an intervention which will protect human rights of the most vulnerable female sex workers, and, ultimately, aid to their voluntary reintegration to the society. In addition, it will provide a critical examination of the existing programs that address sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV. Lastly, it will provide a venue in which sex workers, a silent and disenfranchised population, will gain a voice and influence over decisions that affect their lives.

### **Approach and Methodology**

I collected qualitative data by completing interviews with international and local NGOs that are involved in current anti-trafficking programs in Georgia in order to learn about existing structures and future programs to combat trafficking. These NGOs included: People's Harmonious Development Society, International Organization for Migration, and Georgian Young Lawyers' Association. In addition, I held interviews with staff from the Institute of Dermatology and Venereology, a state STI hospital, outreach workers from Tanadgoma Center, and Women's Advice Center "Sakhli." Lastly, I also held individual interviews with female sex workers (n=14). For the purpose of this research, I interviewed only street based female sex workers as they are the least difficult to approach. There are three tiers of sex workers in Georgia – mobile based sex workers who maintain contact with regular clients and can be reached only through a referral; sauna and hotel sex workers who are often guarded by the establishment's "administrator"; and street based sex workers who are considered to be the poorest and most vulnerable to violence. Due to the low of poverty, street based workers often lack appropriate medical, psychological, and legal assistance.

### **Summary of Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions**

Georgia is currently in its beginning stage of implementation of its anti-trafficking action plan. There is a well established network of local and international NGOs that collaborate on anti-trafficking initiatives. Although legislative changes are scheduled to occur soon, a safe house for victims of trafficking does not exist. In addition, psychological counseling for victims is limited. Lastly, majority of anti-trafficking initiatives are focused on trafficking of Georgian citizens abroad and little attention is paid to in-country trafficking. There are initiatives to inform sex workers of trafficking yet those initiatives are limited to the regions near Turkish border. At the same time, there is a lack of knowledge and understanding of the sex worker community in Georgia.

Of the interviewed street sex workers, majority cited the need to support family, including aging parents and grandchildren, as the primary reason for sex work.

Sex work was chosen due its flexibility and most women were able to tailor their schedule to fit their family needs. Violence from clients and psychological effects of the work were cited as the most detrimental aspect of sex work. Although violence from police still occurs, many stated an improved relationship with the new police force, the "Patrol". Although there are no formal support structures within sex worker community, sex workers rely on assistance from each other. In addition, outreach workers from Tanadgoma Center provide psychological counseling when requested.

There is a high level of HIV awareness amongst sex workers and almost everyone cited condom use with clients. This data needs further investigation as there may be a social desirability factor that affected sex workers' answers. Most are tested regularly for STIs yet some cited incorrect test results as a deterrent from getting further testing. As a side note, by mid-July 2005, there was an increase of police activity to combat prostitution in Tbilisi. According to the NGO community, sex workers were picked up by the police and driven to remote areas outside of Tbilisi. They were then left to walk back home. In addition, forced STI testing, a violation of an individual's rights, still occurs.

There is a diverse opinion among sex workers about legalization of prostitution in Georgia. Of the sex workers who supported legalization, increased police protection was cited as the primary reason. In addition, sex workers felt that legalization would legitimize sex work, and as a result, lessen stigmatization and discrimination from the general population. Sex workers who opposed legalization cited unwillingness to pay taxes on their income for ineffective government support. In addition, some expressed doubt that legalization would improve their social standing. Several street sex workers discussed advantages of working in a sauna or a hotel although such establishments generally accepted young women who were physically appealing.

### **Suggestions for Future Research Agendas**

Discrimination against sex workers exists. Often they are regarded solely as carriers of disease and little attention is paid to environmental and ecological factors that effect sex workers' lives. Further, larger scale assessment of identifying contextual factors related to sex work is needed to design an intervention that will lead to an environmental change.

### **Policy Recommendations**

There is a need for sex worker advocacy in Georgia. Current structures for health screenings and testing for STI/HIV have to be improved. In addition to improving these services, it is vital to facilitate access to them. Tanadgoma Center, one the two organizations that performs outreach work, is staffed with only four outreach workers. The Institute of Dermatology and Venereology employs only one outreach worker. Lastly, initiatives to involve larger communities, such as taxi drivers who are familiar with sex work trade and clients, are needed to decrease the threat of violence. Also, by including clients in preventative interventions, the

burden of enforcing condom use will be lessened for sex workers who are generally responsible for their use.

Currently, initiatives to assist sex workers integrate to the general society do not exist. Training programs in skills development and partnership with the Social Assistance and Employment State Agency should be established.

Georgia's Criminal Code decriminalizes prostitution and sex workers face an administrative fine if arrested. Yet the enforcement of laws is arbitrary and sex workers are often harassed by police. Although the Criminal Code criminalizes procurement of prostitution, clients rarely face legal responsibility. As a result, ambiguous circumstances occur where a sex worker is unable to access legal aid because admission to prostitution results in an arrest of the sex worker and no further action is taken.

Lastly, it is necessary to establish a training program for media. Many sex workers expressed fear and recounted stories of unethical treatment by the media who disclosed women's faces and names to the general public.