

# REDEFINING SEX WORK IN THE REPUBLIC OF GEORGIA

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*The government of Georgia, while complying with current international standards to eradicate human trafficking, has inadvertently neglected the needs of female sex workers. By redefining sex work as a profession and an employment option for women in Georgia, international policy and programming can reduce harm while confronting women's economic realities.*

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Female sex workers in the Republic of Georgia encounter discrimination, stigmatization, and now, regulations against sex workers imposed by the international community, despite the fact that sex work is both a legal and a social reality in Georgia. The Georgian government, faced with pressure to comply with anti-trafficking measures, is forced to adopt regulations dictated by the international community in order to maintain eligibility for monetary aid. As a result, Georgia's criminal laws that address select aspects of prostitution in combination with anti-trafficking legislature have created more harmful conditions for sex workers who already experience social stigmatization. To advocate for this socially and culturally stigmatized population, social workers must be aware of international political developments and international human rights protocols.

## Defining Sex Work

Due to the lack of information available on male sex workers in Georgia, this paper will define sex workers as women who contract to perform sexual services in exchange for explicitly agreed-upon, material payment (Kuo, 2002, p. 57). Such a definition views prostitution as voluntary and chosen work therefore empowering sex workers by normalizing and legitimizing their work. The abolitionist feminist discourse, which argues that women would not choose sex work if presented with other options, attempts to rescue sex workers from an inherently powerless position (Jenness, 1993, p. 78). Although power

dynamics and the current economic situation in Georgia play a complex role in available employment options for women, accepting that all women in the sex industry are there unwillingly frames the argument in terms of victimization of the poor and denies these women agency and choice (Outshoorn, 2004). Instead of criminalizing prostitution, policies must protect sex workers, who are often subjected to violence and deplorable work conditions, through harm reduction modalities (Doezema, 2000).

### Female Sex Workers in Georgian Society

After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Republic of Georgia underwent an economic recession when its largely agricultural economy plunged due to the Russian financial crisis, drought, and political instability. The interethnic conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and neighboring Chechnya resulted in an increase of internally displaced persons, contributing to the economic instability in Georgia. Light, food, and chemical industries, all traditional places of employment for women in Georgia, were directly impacted by the economic downfall, thus causing women to lose jobs and wages (United Nations, 1998). Women were more likely to be dismissed from work than men due to the persistent societal belief that household and childrearing duties were more important than employment in the public sphere (International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights [IHFHR], 2000). By 2002, about 65% of the total population lived below the poverty line, and nearly half of the registered unemployed were female (Shioshvili, 2003).

In Georgian society, women's roles are primarily defined in a domestic capacity. Evidence of this is seen in Georgian literature, works of art, and national symbols such as monuments that revere women as heroic mother figures. By promoting such narrowly defined representations of women, Georgian society reinforces the notion that a woman's sexuality is bound to reproductive purposes. A relationship with a man, sanctioned through marriage, normalizes a woman's social standing while premarital sex, divorce, and extramarital affairs affect women negatively. For example, a recent study noted that divorced women experienced stigmatization and repression as a result of societal pressures (Arutinova, Berekashvili, Berekashvili, Berekashvili, & Tsihistavi, 1999). In addition, the United Nations Development Program conducted a sociological survey on social changes and family structures in Georgia and concluded, "according to universally acceptable social standards, adultery is

a forgivable sin for men, while the public opinion in Georgia is absolutely intolerant of women's infidelity" (Dourglishvili, 1997).

The traditional view of gender roles in Georgia directly impacts society's view on female sex workers. Occupational choice is an important element in one's personal and social identity and if members of society view an occupation as deviant, those groups will be stigmatized (Thompson & Harred, 1999). The ideal of womanhood is shattered when women sex workers test boundaries of acceptable sexual expression and do not conform to maternal roles as dictated by society. As a result, women sex workers are categorized as "other of other," creating a subgroup within an already marginalized population (Kuo, 2002, p. 69). Subsequently, society scapegoats larger-scale problems on subgroups, therefore granting permission to further stigmatize and disenfranchise women sex workers.

At a meeting with the Committee on Human Rights in 2002, the Georgian government stated that statistics on sex workers do not exist, but they affirmed that there are several hundred sex workers in Georgia, mainly in large cities such as Tbilisi, Georgia's capital (Human Rights Committee, 2002). In addition, the government attributed poverty as the contributing factor for prostitution and expressed the need for financial support from the World Bank to end poverty and thus curb prostitution. Since international monetary aid in part depends on a country's commitment to anti-trafficking legislation, the Georgian government hastily attempted to fulfill international anti-trafficking mandates without considering the impact of such changes on the conditions that sex workers face.

### International Anti-Trafficking Efforts

Current international efforts to curb human trafficking became prominent in 2000 when the U.N. Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons was adopted to address the protection of human rights of trafficking victims and to provide measures for their physical, psychological, and social recovery. In accordance with the U.N. Protocol, the U.S. government enacted the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) in October 2000, which requires the U.S. State Department to submit an annual report to the U.S. Congress documenting the status of severe forms of trafficking in persons (Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, 2004). This report focuses resources on prosecution, protection, and prevention policies and programs, such as

education programs for groups vulnerable to trafficking, and support programs for the voluntary return and societal reintegration of trafficking victims. It also recommends the establishment of shelters, crisis centers or safe houses, and specialized legal, psychological, and medical services. In addition to prosecution at an individual level, current policy supports ceasing disbursement of monetary aid by international institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, to ensure state actor accountability.

As awareness of human trafficking increased, international and local organizations criticized Georgia's government for the lack of anti-trafficking measures and the high level of illegal migration and trafficking. As part of the U.S. monitoring mechanism, a system of categories was created that placed each country into one of three tiers. Tier 1 status demonstrates a country's full adherence to the TVPA standards, Tier 2 status demonstrates a country's significant efforts to bring itself to full compliance, and Tier 3 status demonstrates a lack of any governmental action in the prevention of human trafficking. In 2003, as a result of pressures from international communities, including the U.S. government who threatened Tier 3 countries with sanctions, the Georgian government enacted a series of anti-trafficking initiatives and raised its classification to Tier 2. Currently, Georgia is placed on a Tier 2 Watch List for failure to provide evidence of increased efforts to combat severe trafficking from the previous year (Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, 2004).

### The Effect of Anti-Trafficking Initiatives on Sex Workers

Faced with pressure from the international community, the Georgian government initiated changes to incorporate anti-trafficking measures. In 2003, the government added several important articles to the Georgian Criminal Code (Parliament of Georgia, 1999), which, as a result of the additions, prohibited trade and exploitation of persons (Women's Human Rights Program, 2003). The new changes also created contradictory conditions for sex workers. Prostitution was not criminalized, but engaging a person in prostitution became unlawful. Consequently, a sex worker can offer her services but it is illegal for a customer to hire her. The criminal law also prohibits maintaining brothels. Enforcement of such policies drives sex work further underground where abusive practices continue to occur (Kuo, 2002). Sex work is financially necessary for some women, and despite ambiguous laws, it is practiced openly in

Georgia (IHFHR, 2000). Nevertheless, sex workers, who are already stigmatized by society, face harmful working conditions and inadequate institutional support such as police protection and appropriate health services due to the government's failure to acknowledge sex work as a profession.

Violence, especially against women, is an issue of concern in Georgia. Georgia's government does not provide statistics on violence against women, citing difficulty in obtaining information due to the unwillingness by the population to discuss such issues openly (Human Rights Committee, 2002). It is estimated that more than 95% of sexual crimes in Georgia are unreported (Glonti, 2004). Several human rights organizations have reported cases of police beating and raping female sex workers, but the Georgian government has made no effort to reform curricula used by law enforcement agencies that protect women sex workers' rights in cases of violence (U.S. Department of State, 2001). In a report to the Commission on Human Rights, the United Nations Special Rapporteur also highlighted her concerns regarding police violence against female sex workers (Commission on Human Rights, 2003).

Non-governmental organizations such as the Tanadgoma Center for Information and Counseling on Reproductive Rights provide counseling and referrals to health care facilities, reproductive health, and HIV/AIDS education programs. Hospitals and clinics provide health care services to anyone who may seek them. Yet, sex workers are reluctant to seek such services due to experiences of guilt and shame that result in social isolation (Kuo, 2002). Furthermore, lack of trust in police protection creates an obstacle to reporting violent acts (IHFHR, 2000). Programs focused on rescuing women, such as the ones recommended by TVPA, may be inappropriate for sex workers who may not seek help for an immediate change in their lifestyles. Societal expectations for rehabilitation and reintegration criminalize or victimize sex workers, assuming that women sex workers cannot mobilize for change (Jayasree, 2004). When sex workers are regarded as victims of exploitation, this further promotes a sense of stigmatization. It is important to confront the economic reality of sex workers without the distraction of societal definitions of sexuality in order to initiate policy that will improve working conditions for sex workers (Platt, 2001).

### Sex Work and Human Rights Advocacy

It is a state's responsibility to bring forth the necessary measures to

prevent individuals or groups from violating the integrity, freedom of action, or other human rights of an individual. It is also the state's responsibility to address issues of discrimination and stigma rather than overlook these issues while attempting to adhere to international standards that provide international monetary aid. Georgia is party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), effective gender advocacy instruments that address inequalities in social relations and discriminatory practices (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1966; United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, 1979). CEDAW addresses women's rights as human rights and calls for the end of discrimination against women, regardless of their social standing or choice of work. ICESCR furthers the notion of the right to self-determination of both genders and provides guarantees that protect the livelihoods of social groups. For example, Article 8 and Article 9 of the treaty guarantee the right to work in safe and healthy working conditions and the right to form and join unions.

By turning a blind eye to female sex workers, Georgia's government is not upholding its obligation to international human rights treaties. While the Georgian government must be sensitive to the global crisis of human trafficking, it also must create interventions that are sensitive to sex workers' needs and lifestyles. Although sex work as a profession may not be accepted by society, Georgia's traditional views on gender roles cannot justify the violations of human rights of female sex workers.

Social workers play a vital role in the global advocacy of marginalized groups such as female sex workers in Georgia. According to the National Association of Social Workers' *Code of Ethics* (1999), social workers must promote social justice and social change on behalf of their clients, whether individuals, groups, or communities. It is also a social worker's responsibility to advocate and promote social justice on the global as well as the local level. A social worker must act as an advocate when international policy, especially policy that carries a caveat of monetary aid, overlooks its negative effects that marginalize and further discriminate against a segment of a society. Social work is a way to initiate, stimulate, and raise awareness of a policy's impact on the rights of all members of a society and to ensure that those rights are upheld locally and globally.

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