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Human trafficking in South Caucasus

Trafficking in human beings is often characterized as a modern form of slavery. This perception evokes images of women, men and children being forcibly taken from their homes and transported elsewhere for the purpose of sexual or labor exploitation. However, in reality the vast majority of trafficking cases is an attempt to earn a living abroad, a distorted way of migration that went terribly wrong.

Armenia and Georgia are countries of origin, transit and destination for victims of trafficking in persons in South Caucasus, as well as a place where they are exploited.

The break-up of the Soviet Union brought many positive changes for Armenia, but it had also strong negative consequences such as a drastic decrease in economic well-being and access to housing and employment, which led to emigration. The economic hardship and the resulting need to look for work abroad and continuing gender inequality in Armenia were quoted by respondents as the main root causes of trafficking from Armenia.

Information about trafficking in human beings in, from and through Armenia is sketchy and often not reliable. Existing limited knowledge about the profile of

trafficked persons, vulnerability factors influencing the occurrence of trafficking and modus operandi used by traffickers is generally based on information gathered from Armenian victims of trafficking who have returned home, have been identified and assisted. The majority of these are women and they were trafficked for sexual exploitation. Even this limited information available is not systematically collected and analyzed. NGOs that assist victims of trafficking do not have the capacity to provide generalized data due to lack of financial and human resources and each governmental agency provides at best basic data referring to their particular area of responsibility only. No single actor collects and analyzes the data available.

The most well-known cases of trafficking were those of trafficking for sexual exploitation. This kind of trafficking is often understood in Armenia not as a condition similar to slavery but it is mixed up with prostitution. The fact that the law-enforcement units sometimes regard cases of pimping and engagement in prostitution as “trafficking” and vice versa is illustrative in this regard. There is a widespread view that a woman who consented to work as a prostitute cannot be a victim of trafficking, that she is simply a prostitute (a bad woman) who “should have known better”.

In practically all available documents on trafficking in Armenia, including the US State Department Trafficking in Persons Report 2006, Armenia is considered to be mainly a country of origin.⁶ It seems that trafficking for sexual exploitation usually starts in Armenia, from where recruited victims are trafficked to Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and other countries. There seem to be two main

trafficking routes through land to Georgia (Batumi) and then to Turkey or either directly or through Moscow to the United Arab Emirates. In Moscow, Armenian victims sometimes get forged Russian passports. As for labor exploitation and trafficking for labor exploitation, it seems that the main destination country is Russia.

In order to combat human trafficking, Georgia has for several years been dynamically carrying out a series of activities, in terms of elaborating and efficiently implementing relevant legislative base.

Human trafficking in Georgia is common, where people are subjected to forced prostitution and forced labor. In 2009, women and girls from Georgia were forced into prostitution in Georgia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and Greece. In recent years, cases of forced prostitution of Georgian victims were also documented in Russia, Germany, and Austria. Men and women have been forced into labor in Georgia, Libya and Turkey. Men from Turkey are also forced into labor in the breakaway region of Abkhazia, which is outside the Georgian government's control.

Street children in Georgia, are particularly susceptible to exploitation through means of trafficking. Whether it be through begging or theft by third parties, including their parents, this subcategory of the population is considered to be at risk. Children working in agriculture and in the informal urban economy are especially vulnerable to forced labor.

Trafficking of children is a large concern within this area. Thousands of children living in the streets and in orphanages are trafficked annually. Some

families experiencing economic hardship have been forced to separate, which has directly increased the number of children living on the streets in Georgia. This is a direct result of familial stress on the children, which often leads to youth feeling responsible to take on means of supporting the family in hard times, by then bringing in money through illegal means.

As a large portion of children, who are susceptible to be drawn into the realm of trafficking, are first noted as high-risk youth and street children, it is relevant to note that statistic that UNICEF estimated that 28.8 percent of children ages 5 to 14 years in Georgia were working in 1999. While the majority of working children work in family businesses, and in agriculture in rural areas, there are reports of significant numbers of children, some as young as 5 years old, engaged in begging or working on the streets. Children as young as 9 years old are found working in markets, sometimes at night, and involved in carrying or loading wares. Children also work in cafes, bistros, gas stations, and for street photographers. The relevance of these statistics annotate the sense that a majority of these working children are out in the community, as opposed to working within the safer confines of their homes. Having to go outside the home to work within the community at a young age plays a role in the risk of being a youth in this area. According to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, police violence against street children is a problem. In general, there is a lack of social safety services for children living on the street, with disabilities or from dysfunctional households.

Children, especially young girls are commonly trafficked for the purposes of Commercial sexual exploitation of children, particularly for prostitution and pornography. In 2003, the statistical bureau of the Supreme Court reported 24 registered cases of the use of children in the drug trade and trafficking. This burden can then lead to negative impacts the female as they mature on both their sexual health, as well as concerns about their mental stability.

The government of Georgia fully complies with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking where children are involved. During the year, however, local experts expressed serious concerns about the government's view of its trafficking problem and its lack of effective efforts in the first half of the reporting period to proactively identify victims of this serious crime. In the duration of the reporting period, the government increased the number of trafficking cases investigated and the percentage of prosecutions that resulted in convictions of trafficking offenders. The government also significantly increased funding for anti-trafficking training and trafficking prevention activities, including in the budgets of its shelters for victims. The government significantly increased the number of Georgian officials provided training on victim identification.