

# *A Look at the Linkages: How does Gender, Migration, Labour and Trafficking Intersect in Women's Lives?*

*A Qualitative Research based on the migration and labour experiences of women from Ursoaia village, Republic of Moldova*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Past research on migration and trafficking in Moldova has often explored these phenomena separately, where women have been defined as objects in migration and trafficking processes. This feminist participatory action research (FPAR) is a unique research project in that women are placed at the center of the above-mentioned phenomena and because their voices and visions are central to shaping the research report. To date, this FPAR is also the only research that examines the existing links and intersections between gender, migration, labour and exploitation.

Grounding the research within the context of Ursoaia, a medium-sized rural community in Moldova, allowed the researcher to take into account current and evolving gendered rural stereotypes and values when researching the migration and work experiences of local women. The focus groups identified the common values shared by women in the community. But sensitive information about the lessons learned from migration experiences and the problems that arose from migration were only collected during individual interviews.

The impact of women's labour migration experiences on families was by far the most significant issue for participants involved. For many in the village, labour migration was an economic survival strategy due to high unemployment rates in rural areas. Labour migration broadened women's social roles and changed men's social roles; women became economic providers while some men had to take on more domestic responsibilities. Women were very honest about how they struggled emotionally and socially with family separation, and about the painful decisions between economic survival and family unity.

Women had to frame their labour migration experiences very carefully once they returned to the village. Women described the village community as being 'cruel' to those who had experienced exploitation or negative migration experiences. As such, women only dared to share their negative experiences in individual interviews (women mostly shared positive experiences in focus groups). For most participants, exploitation largely meant not being paid for one's labour, although sexual exploitation was also acknowledged as a risk for women (e.g. feeling pressured to endure sexual harassment to keep one's job). Many women also did not identify themselves as *victims* of exploitation even though they talked in detail about the exploitation that had happened to them - a distinction that should be considered by assistance organisations in destination and origin countries.

The typical anti-trafficking frameworks have a strong law enforcement/criminal justice orientation yet women described the limitations of these frameworks in addressing exploitation that occurs in "lawless" contexts. Many of the women were very skeptical about the value of existing legal systems. The current research confirms again that migrants are often left alone or without guidance when they encounter problems in destination countries. Stigmatisation by rural communities of returnee migrants who are also victims of exploitation is also an important issue that needs to be addressed in anti-trafficking campaigns in order to change existing attitudes and stereotypes.

This particular participatory research was a process that combined research with education and action. The FPAR identified women's demands, particularly the need for information on existing laws and policies related to labour migration and the need for social or psychological support due to negative labour migration experiences. The FPAR in Moldova demonstrated that the women who shared their experiences gained spaces to reflect on their experiences, be self-critical and self-improving, and perceived themselves as powerful persons who had resisted adversity and survived.

Initial actions included a campaign event coordinated by La Strada in Ursoaia village. During this event, women had the option of directly accessing professional counseling services from a psychologist, a social worker, and a lawyer. The campaign also promoted La Strada's toll-free Hotline number where women could access information related to labour migration issues. After the campaign event, the number of Hotline calls from the Causeni region increased three-fold.

The FPAR consolidated the group of community women and they continue to have ad-hoc meetings discussing various aspects of their lives. Based on the wishes of participants to continue the group discussions, the local administration kindly offered space in the Mayor's Office where women could meet each other.

It is hoped that women's testimonials and comments in this report will assist stakeholders in improving current labour migration policies to better reflect the needs, goals and perspectives of migrating women so that women can fully access their rights - whichever country they are in.

*"We, women, are now in the challenging position: how to combine being a Mother, a Wife and a Breadwinner.."*

A.C., 41 y.o., Ursoaia village, Republic of Moldova



#### ABOUT LA STRADA MOLDOVA

**International Center for Women Rights Protection and Promotion "La Strada" Moldova**  
The International Centre "La Strada" strives to build a society based on the principle of respect for human rights, related to the issue of trafficking in persons and all forms of abuse against children and women. It is active in direct assistance, prevention activities and lobbying activities. One of La Strada Moldova's principles is widening victims' access to assistance and protection, irrespective if they are willing to cooperate with the police.

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