THE GLOBAL INSTITUTE FOR HEALTH AND HUMAN RIGHTS

NEWSLETTER: SUMMER AND FALL 2016

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About...

The Global Institute for Health and Human Rights (GIHHR) was developed in 2012 by physicians and human rights activists, Arash and Kamiar Alaei. The brothers have worked for decades in the field of health and human rights. Since its certification in 2013 by the University at Albany, the GIHHR has aimed to facilitate a deeper understanding of the intersection between the areas of health and human rights, with a concentration on reproductive health, maternal and child care, HIV/AIDS prevention and harm reduction. This activism is necessary because of the interdisciplinary nature of this field. There are not many who view health as a human right and this belief is what the Alaei brothers seek to change. The GIHHR strives to gain an understanding of this complex field of study and work in collaboration with others to promote further understanding across the globe. Some methods for accomplishing these goals are completed through research, education, policy, advocacy and development of programs. Through this work, solutions to the many problems in this field can be discovered and enhanced to positively affect millions around the world.

University Programs

On top of their work around the world, the GIHHR also participates in university based programs in order to help students succeed at SUNY Albany and beyond. One program the Institute works on in collaboration with Rockefeller College is the Advanced Graduate Certificate in International Health and Human Rights. This certificate provides courses made to help students and working professionals learn and understand the complex field of health and human rights. Another program the GIHHR is involved in is the World of Global Medicine and Human Rights. This Living-Learning Community offers biology, public health, and pre-health majors a supportive environment that encourages academic success and learning through classes students take with other L-LC members.
Past Events

Summer 2016:

- **June 9-10**—The Alaei brothers attend a National Institutes of Health (NIH) hosted workshop called "Ethical, legal, and policy challenges in HIV research with key populations"
  - Arash and Kamiar present two case studies during the workshop on legal and policy changes affecting HIV/AIDS programs and a rights based approach to harm reduction in Iran
  - Their focus was on key populations (i.e. sex workers, people who inject drugs, men who have sex with men, transgender, incarcerated populations) as well as young women who have a high risk of HIV acquisition

- **June 14**—Arash and Kamiar participate in a panel discussion with several dozen other scholars to talk about the higher education needs of displaced Syrian students
  - The panel, called University-in-Exile for Syrian Scholars, was hosted by the Institute of International Education (IIE)
  - Also in attendance was Dr. Allan Goodman, the President and CEO of IIE

- **July 18-22**—21st International AIDS Conference in Durban South Africa
  As well as attending the conference, the GIHHR also co-chair several events at the 2016 AIDS Conference

- **August 17-22**—The Alaei brothers see a presentation at the 28th International Congress of Pediatrics on HIV and children at Vancouver, Canada

Fall 2016:

- **October 7-8**—Trip to Erbil, Iraq
  - Arash and Kamiar participate in a workshop at Hawler Medical University in Erbil to discuss women’s health in Kurdistan with other scholars and physicians

- **October 20**—Fulbright Event
  - GIHHR hosts senior program officer of the Fulbright U.S. Student Program, Lora Seery to discuss the various scholarships Fulbright offers
Physicians Arash and Kamiar Alaei travelled to Erbil, Iraq on October 7 with a team of individuals in order to facilitate capacity building for women’s right to health in Kurdistan. As the founders of the GIHHR, the brothers work to better understand and create solutions for the areas of health and human rights. During this trip, the Alaei brothers and their associates met at Hawler Medical University and attended several workshops over the course of a few days. These presentations were provided by Hawler faculty members, and they discussed topics such as environmental challenges in Kurdistan, substance use, HIV/AIDS, mental health, and barriers to health during war. These workshops helped to promote talk about various issues in Iraq that need to be addressed, as well as encourage open conversation about possible solutions to these problems through different backgrounds and views. The greatest accomplishment that resulted from these communications, however, was the approval to build a woman’s health center in Kurdistan.

Currently, the GIHHR is working to train over 270 women leaders from non-for-profit organizations in Iran on health, environment and economic development issues.

The journey to Erbil was the result of immense work from the Alaei brothers and their colleagues over the last year to address the topic of women’s health. In 2015, The GIHHR proposed holding workshops that would be attended by both Iraqi and American university faculty members. This cooperation would improve relations between the two countries and lead to more substantial change in the areas of women’s health. The efforts of Arash and Kamiar Alaei to provide these workshops resulted in their grant being accepted and funded by IREX, an organization with the goal of strengthening NPO’s and improving universal education. This conference has further solidified relations between Iraq and the U.S. and, on top of paving the way for a women’s health center, also established a program dedicated to reduce maternal mortality and morbidity in Iraq.
Over the summer, the GIHHR, in collaboration with the International Aids Society (IAS), sponsored a delegation of 15 key individuals to attend the 21st International AIDS Conference in Durban, South Africa. In addition to providing the funds to accommodate these individuals, the Institute also organized and co-chaired several events during the conference.

These meetings included a satellite session titled “HIV in Conservative Social Settings: Promoting A Rights-Based Approach to HIV,” on July 18. This event took place following a meeting in Istanbul early in the year to inspire cooperation between various delegates in the field of HIV. Both Arash and Kamiar Alaei presented during the session, and discussed the topic of HIV/AIDS. That same day, the GIHHR organized a networking session: “Developing Networks Among MENA & Central Asian Countries.” This session aimed to build collaborations among all of the delegates attending the conference, many of whom work in a variety of different disciplines in the field of HIV. This event allowed individuals to share their experiences and inspire conversation throughout Islamic countries.

The last session sponsored by the GIHHR was a symposia held July 20, titled “Vulnerable Populations and HIV/AIDS in Islamic communities.” This meeting was held to address the ongoing struggles people face in Islamic nations, with an emphasis on a broad range of populations, including women, refugees and immigrants. The session was targeted towards health care workers, program implementers and community workers. During the event, Arash Alaei gave a presentation on behalf of a professor unable to attend the conference because of the coup d’état in Turkey that led to the shutdown of the country’s airports.

Overall, the GIHHR’s role in these important meetings was an integral part of what made the conference such a success.
**Why it is Needed:** One of GIHHR’s most recent and largest programs currently underway is the Syrian Education Project. Due to the conflict in Syria, millions of people have been displaced from their homes. What is more, it is estimated that nearly 200,000 of these refugees qualify for higher education. Yet, because of their tumultuous situation, they are forced to set aside aspirations of furthering their education. Whether they still remain in their home cities or have fled to other countries, these would be students do not receive the education they deserve. In the fight to survive, they must halt their aspirations of a college degree. Even for those displaced who are able to take college level courses, they are still hindered because many of the classes offered are taught only in English, rather than their native language of Arabic. This language barrier stops many in this position from advancing their education.

*Photo: Michael P. Farrell/Times Union*
What it does/How it works: This is where the Syrian Education Project comes into play. Created in June 2016, this program has been in the works for almost a year. The Alaei brothers have collaborated with many people during that time to provide online classes for medical students which can be transferred for credit, therefore furthering their pursuit of a higher education.

One of the organizations they work with is the Free Aleppo University. This online program was created by many of the displaced physicians in Syria, and seeks to provide an opportunity for medical students to continue their college education. It is through this university that students can apply to the Syrian Education Project. They take classes from various courses taught by professors at the University at Albany, which are recorded. These videos are then transcribed by interns working for the GIHHR so that they can be translated into Arabic. This step is critical because it allows students not fluent in English to continue their education in their native language. These translated lectures are then administered to students online and can be accessed through smartphones because, while most of these refugees are not in possession of computers, many do own cellphones. These courses are essential in preserving the students right to education, in addition to instilling a sense of normalcy and excitement into the lives of people who have had to sacrifice so much. The program is currently being accessed by over 300 medical students.

“We thought maybe when we deliver their academic course maybe when we say ‘we are with you, we don’t forget you,’ we can connect them with our students and faculty members. Maybe their life will be easier and maybe the hope and passion they had will come back,” Arash Alaei said.

English Learning Program: While these courses are offered to students in their native languages, it is also understood that learning English would help increase global opportunities in the future. Therefore, there is a second project being offered for those who wish to learn the language, called the Intensive English Learning Program or IELP. This Program provides thorough reading, writing and speaking courses, to ensure rapid development and skill in the language. The IELP is currently being offered to students who take a placement exam provided by the Free Aleppo University and qualify for upper intermediate level English. This program involves a vast amount of effort from the Alaei brothers as well as the volunteers at the GIHHR.
Individual Efforts: One member of the GIHHR staff who has dedicated a significant amount of time and effort into the project is Michelle DeOcampo. On top of working closely with Arash and Kamiar Alaei to develop programs and courses for these refugees, she is also an instructor for the IELP in a class of 15 students. She, with the help of other program instructors, provide homework and, once a week, administer live webcam sessions with the students. DeOcampo says “This is the most crucial part...because it allows us [the instructors] to provide the students with first hand help and address problems in the course.” During the live sessions, students have discussions with one another as well as the instructors about homework that was assigned throughout the week and ask and answer questions. Of the many excellent aspects of the program, DeOcampo enjoys seeing her students grow and improve their English in the span of just one live class. “It’s very rewarding.” But, she also notes, it is very unique. As an instructor, “you get different insight into their [the students] lives.” As its title suggests, the program is intensive and there is a lot of work to do. Sometimes students are unable to finish assignments, but their reasons why are very different than the response one might expect in the United States. DeOcampo said, instead of a new show on Netflix or other trivial distractions, they miss a class because there was a bombing in their city, or they had to go to the hospital to visit a family member who was injured, even killed. “Circumstances are very different; but, they are very apologetic if they miss a class” she said. They want to learn.
Future Goals: No matter how much good this program has already done, the Alaei brothers have set their sights even higher. They hope to be able to provide online courses to every student who wants to further his or her education, not just medical students. Furthermore, they intend to create a smartphone application specifically made for these online courses, called Shaban. Kamiar and Arash Alaei have enlisted the help of the UAlbany Department of Computer Science and Engineering to make this application, which, according to Arash Alaei, is scheduled to be tested within the month. This app will greatly aide students by streamlining the process for completing and turning in work. Currently, they have to juggle with multiple different sites (i.e. Blackboard to submit homework, Webinar for live sessions) in order to do the work given to them.

Additionally, these platforms are made to be accessed on computers and oftentimes, there are problems when they are used via smartphone. By creating an application made for cellphones, students will better be able to complete work given to them, with less technical difficulties.

“We are very happy to help these medical students to become the new generation of doctors,” Kamiar Alaei said. “This is our hope, not just academic education but also communication to have a better definition for doctors who care about the society, and that is rewarding.”

In the meantime, however, the GIHHR is working hard to both enhance the programs already up and running and expand the number of displaced students able to access them. Shannon Moquin, an intern with the GIHHR, is currently creating an IELP program on Blackboard for students whose English is at the intermediate level. She, with the help of other interns and IELP instructors, is setting up assignments that test the different abilities of the students English comprehension.

“It’s crazy to think that there are Syrian refugees signing up for my classes right now, halfway around the world.” Moquin said.

Overall, the goal of the Syrian Education Program is to increase access to education for all displaced people and to increase the universal communication provided to students in order to help their careers in the future. While progress has been incredible, there is still so much more to be done. By promoting the Program to new sites and across campus, the GIHHR intends to get the word out, therefore, making more people aware of the program and, hopefully, eager to help it in some way.
September Johnson is a senior public health major and the intern coordinator for the GIHHR. Her diligence and devotion led her to be accepted into the competitive CDC Undergraduate Public Health Scholars (CUPS) program. The program accepted only 170 of the 3500 applications and September was one. The CUPS program consists of six internship opportunities that take place at four partner institutions that offer public health workplace experience to increase student interest in minority health.

September was a part of a program stationed in Baltimore Maryland. During her 10 week stay, she collaborated with doctors at a healthcare clinic and worked closely with several children who had severe learning disabilities. By interacting with these children, as well as their parents and teachers, she was able to deliver insight into the best methods for how to provide care for these children. Additional work she conducted at the clinic included research and data collection on the education and care of students with learning disabilities in classrooms of various schools.

At the end of the summer, she presented her research to fellow members of the CUPS program, detailing what she believes should be the next steps for experts in the field of public health.

As she commences her final year here at the University at Albany this coming May, September plans to continue working in the field of child health as well as work more in depth with maternal and child care and sex education.
Natalie Turner is a senior social work major and has spent her undergraduate years working at the GIHHR. Last year, she applied and was accepted into the Amgen Program at the National Institutes of Health. She spent 10 weeks of her summer working for this prestigious program in Bethesda, Maryland. For forty hours a week, Natalie helped scientists in various projects regarding biomedical research. Her day to day schedule consisted of working with her peers and mentor (NIH provides each accepted student with a mentor who will help guide research and enhance learning experience). One project which she worked on included intensive research on stomach cancer. She coded and analyzed information in order to determine the factors that cause this form of cancer. Her impressive work aided one scientist in particular, whose work showed an increasing prevalence of stomach cancer in non-Hispanics. With Natalie’s help, this trend was determined to be accurate.

For two days in July, Natalie and the other Amgen students were flown to California for the Program’s symposium. This symposium allowed Amgen scholars to present information about the research they conducted to members of other programs, as well as scientists. This conference enables participants to learn about multiple different forms of research and creates networking opportunities with people from across the country.

There were a number of things which Natalie learned during her summer of research, which included coding and analyzing information and trends in data.

“I would recommend the NIH Amgen program to anyone interested in health disparities. Everyone I met at the NIH was so willing to work with me to develop scientific skills that were relevant, not only to my summer research project, but also to potential future research projects. They have so many resources there, especially for anyone interested in a career involving science, health, or research.”

After graduation in May, Natalie plans to get her Masters in Social Work and is considering working for her Masters in Public Health as well. UAlbany is on her list of potential places to attend for graduate school, along with several other schools around the country.
Ongoing Grants

- **USAID** – $1,600,000
  “Bridging the Gaps in Human Rights Law in Iran Through Enhancing Health Law Capacity”
- **USAID** – $53,000
  “Global Health Diplomacy”
- **USAID** – $1,380,000
  “Training in Leadership in Health, Environment, and Sustainable Development”
- **USAID** – $170,098
  “Science Diplomacy”
- **USDOS** – $100,000
  “Educational Diplomacy” to establish an Institute for Iranian Studies. Was considered, awaiting final approval
- **IREX** – $50,000
  “Interdisciplinary capacity building for women’s health”

Submitted Grants

- **Chobani Foundation** – $50,000
  “Recruiting Bilingual Faculty to Develop and Deliver Multiple Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in Arabic”
- **USDOS** – $100,000
  “Educational Diplomacy” to establish an Institute for Iranian Studies.
- **USAID** – $1,000,000
  “Children’s Rights in Afghanistan”

Accepted Grants

- **Open Society Foundation** – $60,000
  “Refining Current Drug Policies in Turkey”
- **Ohrstrom Foundation** – $52,000
  “Developing a Community-Based Educational Curriculum and Training Program for Turkey’s Research, Treatment, and Training Center for Alcohol and Substance Dependence”
- **OFID** – $300,000
  Funding to continue HIV/AIDS research
- **Falconwood Foundation** – $25,000
  “Delivering Online Academic Courses for Displaced Syrian Students”
  In addition to this grant, the University at Albany Foundation has also matched this challenging grant with an additional $25,000 contribution to the GIHHR
Publications:

**Correlates of Injection Drug Use Among Individuals Admitted to Public and Private Drug Treatment Facilities in Turkey**

Elif Mutlu, Arash Alaei, Melissa Tracy, Katherine Waye, Mustafa Kemal Cetin, Kamiar Alaei

**Abstract:**
The number of individuals seeking treatment for drug use has been increasing in recent years in Turkey. However, existing research on patterns and risk factors for drug use and how they vary by age and location in Turkey is limited. We examined the socio-demographic characteristics, drug use behaviors, and treatment history of citizens admitted to inpatient substance use treatment at public and private facilities in Turkey during 2012 and 2013 and identified correlates of lifetime and current injection drug use. Of the 11,247 patients at the 22 public treatment centers in 2012–2013, a majority were male, lived with family, were unemployed, and had an average age of 27 years. Within private clinics (n = 663), a higher proportion was female (9.7% private vs. 5.7% public), aged 11–17 years old (13% vs. 7.4%), used cannabis as their primary drug (18.4% vs. 13.2%), and had previously received drug treatment (57% vs. 47.2%). Within public centers, 40.4% reported ever injecting drugs and 33.7% reported injecting in the past 30 days; the corresponding percentages at private clinics were 22.5% and 18.1%. Significant predictors of injection drug use included being homeless, being a temporal employee or unemployed, having higher education, heroin as a preferred drug, having a longer duration of drug use, and prior drug treatment. Prevention and intervention efforts are needed to reduce the transition to heroin and injection drug use among youth as well as improve access to a variety of drug treatment options for people who use substances in Turkey.

http://www.drugandalcoholdependence.com/article/S0376-8716(16)30071-0/abstract

**Using PrEP, Losing Condoms? PrEP Promotion May Undermine Safe Sex.**

Alaei K, Paynter CA, Juan SC, Alaei A.

**Abstract:**
PrEP is a crucial new tool for the prevention of HIV. However, careful attention must be paid as to whether its widespread adoption could reduce condom usage, which may in turn increase STIs in the long-run. In this article we re-assess whether PrEP uptake may influence condom usage, and we call for vigilance by public health advocates to ensure that PrEP promotion does not lead to a drop-off in safe sex practices. Most of the evidence that PrEP does not change condom usage comes from double-blind clinical trials which are focused on the biological effect of PrEP on HIV incidence. However, subjects in these trials may not change their behavior because they do not actually know if they are taking PrEP. A number of focus group studies on individuals considering taking PrEP show that many see the drug as an opportunity for increasing unprotected sex. National survey data from the CDC show that condom rates are decreasing among MSM, which are a major target group for PrEP. Furthermore, data from public health records show that STIs are increasing among MSM in some areas with relatively high PrEP uptake. There is enough evidence that PrEP is contributing to rising STI infections to warrant concern. Public health advocates must ensure that PrEP uptake does not inadvertently threaten the public's health and that thirty years of condom promotion are not wasted.


**Healthcare and the Preventable Silent Killer: The Growing Epidemic of Hepatitis C in Pakistan**

Kamir Alaei, Mohammad Sarwar, Shao Chiu Juan, Arash Alaei

**Abstract:**
Twelve years ago, research had proposed that Pakistan was becoming a “cirrhotic state” due to the increasing prevalence of liver diseases (1). Hepatitis C was described as a serious problem even then; in certain areas, up to a fourth of hospital beds were occupied by patients due to the complications of the Hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection. Villages were gripped by fear; no one knew whose life would be taken next by the deadly virus. The government made promises to prevent HCV through stringent regulations after seeing the effects that this deadly disease had. Sadly, they remain undelivered and Pakistan now has one of the highest rates of HCV, second only to Egypt.

http://hepatmon.com/?page=article&article_id=41262
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