Global Institute for Health and Human Rights

2017 Fall Newsletter

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The Global Institute for Health and Human Rights (GIHHR) was founded by physicians and human rights activists Arash and Kamiar Alaei in 2012. Since its approval by the University at Albany in early 2013, the institute 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, education and harm reduction. The GIHHR has been instrumental in helping to reconstruct the concept of health as a human right, and to help bridge the gap between these two fields. In order to accomplish this goal, the institute works with a number of organizations at both the national and international level in the areas of research, advocacy, policy, education and implementation. By, continuing to use these different methods and working on numerous projects with a variety in size and scope, the GIHHR can branch out and continue to expand and improve its programs.

Mission Statement:

*The Global Institute for Health and Human Rights aims to facilitate a deeper understanding of the intersection between health and human rights to promote and protect the right to health and education.*
Advisory Board Meeting

In the space of less than five years, the GIHHR has expanded from a handful of workers to more than 50 full time and part time staff and interns. This does not include members of the advisory board, board of directors, and additional workers who volunteer their time to aid in many of the institute’s numerous projects. This rapid growth was just one of the many discussions during the GIHHR’s fourth annual advisory board meeting. In April of 2017, many members of the GIHHR team met to give essential feedback and suggestions about the direction which the institute should take in the following years.

The meeting began with a synopsis of the projects the organization has undertaken in the last year. Also brought up were major seminars and presentations which Arash and Kamiar had taken part in, along with publications and research published by some of the institute’s staff and interns.

Following a brief summary of events, the meeting’s attendants broke up into two groups. One group focused on fundraising and how to raise money for the organization's many programs at both a local and global level. The other group discussed restructuring the institute, and how to create a larger and more comprehensive network of communication between interns, staff and global partners.

After a short recess, the groups split up again to discuss the GIHHR’s international and national presence, and priorities, policy and implementation. The first group highlighted the importance of establishing more global partnerships and aligning with other organizations that share the same goals. The job of the second group was to form a list of objectives for the institute to focus on completing over the next few years.

Overall, the meeting was worthwhile in addressing the GIHHRs’ successes as well as what improvements need to be made so that the institute can provide aid to the largest possible number of people.
Global Education: Shaban App and New Programs in Conflict Zones

The Online Education Program was created by the GIHHR in the summer of 2016 to address the need for students in conflict zones to receive a higher education. This program is split into two sections: Online Academic Courses and the Intensive English Learning Program (IELP). The Syrian Education Program branches off of this initiative to provide internally displaced Syrian medical students with the opportunity to pursue a secondary education. Currently, this program is helping 525 medical students who would otherwise not have access to the resources necessary to continue their education.

Most Syrian medical students do not have access to desktop PC’s or laptops; but, based on studies, we have learned that around 90 percent have access to smartphones. To allow easier accessibility for students on mobile devices, the GIHHR, in collaboration with Mei-Hwa Chen and the University at Albany computer science department, created the smartphone app Shaban. This app creates a single platform for students to communicate with IELP Instructors through both video and messaging, access class materials, such as lectures and videos, and submit assignments. Shaban is a vital aspect of the program that can ensure these medical students have the tools they need to succeed.

In addition to the smartphone app, the GIHHR is planning to launch the Syrian Friendship Program. Syrian medical students will paired with Teaching Assistants from the institute, volunteers from other countries in the Middle East (such as Iraq) and students from the University of Glasgow to provide emotional support and conversation between these groups. Based on observations in past and current classes, many students benefit from the program in more ways than learning English and taking medical classes. Students are given a positive outlet to work and learn in the midst of their struggle living on conflict zones, and to share their experiences with their peers and TAs. The institute hopes to build off of this idea, and further apply the concept of a safe space where students can talk openly and express their emotions during this arduous time in their lives.

Lastly, due to the great success of the Syrian Education Program, The GIHHR hopes to expand the Online Education Program to other areas of conflict and provide education to displaced medical students around the world.
Research on current policies in regions within the Middle East has shown the need to highlight the role of environmental NGOs and public service leadership as tools in sustainable environmental intervention. As a response to this need to combat the country’s environmental issues, the GIHHR developed the Online Training of Trainer in Environment, Health, and Sustainable Development. This training focused on three major topics: environmental health, sustainable development, and leadership for environmental sustainability.

The course has two main objectives. The first goal was introducing participants to key concepts of the three topics stated; the second goal, was enabling them to develop the skills required to address environmental issues. These skills include, but are not limited to, transdisciplinary thinking, critical and system thinking, problem solving, collaboration and conflict resolution, developing and writing project proposals and project implementation.

All three courses were designed to cover a time period between 18-22 weeks. During these weeks, students were taught through the use of lectures, live sessions and discussion posts, followed by two class activities, one assignment and a final project.

The first semester, 120 students applied, and the following semester contained a class of 190 applicants. A total of 25 applied projects were developed over the course of two semesters, including environmental policy, climate change education, water management and filtration and more.

This online training was one of the first of its kind, and offered both theoretical and practical applications to areas in the Middle East. It is believed that continuing this work will have a significant impact on areas at risk of environmental issues, and will lead to sustainable change, not only in one location, but throughout countries and regions.
Background:
The right to health is one of the most fundamental human rights that a person can have. Despite its importance at international, national and individual levels, however, these rights have received little attention in the Middle East in terms of education and policy. This region has specifically not complied with the UN established Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ESCR). ESCR outlines a series of rights which each person should be granted. They include, among other requirements, the right to work freely and with equal opportunity, the right to education, the right to a safe work environment and more.

Health law and the right to health is directly linked to ESCR, so, in order to address these issues in the Middle East, The GIHHR has established the project, “Bridging the Gaps in Human Rights Law in the Middle East Through Enhancing Health Law Capacity.”

Implementation:
The Health Law Project is a four-month (18-week) online course, aimed at educating students, lawyers, policy makers and medical professionals in the Middle East. During the 2015-2016 academic year, the program schedule was established, the course was developed and translated, professors and lecturers were recruited and interested participants applied for and were accepted into the program. The summer of 2016 was the first cohort of classes and the following summer, in 2017, a second class was delivered. Each online course had around 60 students who participated in the 18-week training. These sessions were divided into subjects which highlighted the different topics relating to international health and human rights law.

These topics included:

International Law
Medical Ethics
Non-Discrimination and Equality
Introduction to ESCRs
Physical and Mental Health and Human Rights
Social Determinants of Health
Women’s Right to Health
Child’s Right to Health
Rights of Persons with Disabilities
Rights-Based Approach to HIV/AIDs and Health
Refugees and Migrants Right to Health
Minorities Access to Health and Human Rights
Environmental Health and Human Rights
Trade, Health and Human Rights
Universal Mechanisms
Monitoring and Evaluation
Grassroots and Advocacy
All of these topics were presented through a series of lectures, readings, and live session discussions. Furthermore, trainees were divided into groups and combined their knowledge to analyze a case study and present an answer to a real-world problem. A few of these topics included mental health, women’s, children’s and refugee’s right to health, and environment and human rights.

**Goals:** Through this training, the GIHHR hoped to introduce students to ESCRs using a health law and human rights based approach. By communicating through live sessions, discussions and lectures, the course sought to provide a safe atmosphere for its participants, as well as strengthen networks between professor and student. Lastly, the Health Law Project hoped to build connections with those living in the Middle East, so that is could help empower them to enact positive change in the region.

**Turkey Workshop:** In addition to the training courses, 42 of the participants were granted scholarships to attend a workshop in Istanbul, Turkey. Participants who received scholarships were chosen on the basis of their performance in the online course. Diversity in gender, age, ethnicity, religion, (dis)ability, cities of origin, and occupation were also considered for the selection. This workshop, which took place at the Istanbul University Law School in mid-July, allowed students to reflect and share information about all they learned regarding the various topics in their case-studies. Participants were separated into breakout sessions, where each group talked about the various cultural and legal challenges that prevent these topics from being addressed and implemented in the region. In addition to creating a forum for discussion, students were given the opportunity to network with their peers and other professionals in their field throughout the week-long workshop.

**Results:** The overwhelming opinions on the training and workshop was that they were a success. Students who showed particular interest and dedication were considered to develop a networking program of their own. They created six working groups on rights of women, children, persons with disability, mental health, refugees, and environment. Each group, additionally, developed a proposal on the recommended way to enact these topics in the region. These plans are being reviewed and improved by several mentors who help provide feedback to the groups.

Interest in further research on the right to health was another result of the course, and students have begun work on papers and doctoral and master’s dissertations on this topic, along with talk about establishing a NGO dedicated to the right to health in regions in the Middle East. These steps have proved instrumental in raising awareness about ESCRs throughout the Middle East and may result in the eventual implementation of policies addressing these crucial issues.
GIHHR Academic Programs

In addition to its many projects, the GIHHR participates in several University based programs and courses. These classes serve to provide Albany students to succeed at the undergraduate level and beyond.

Farsi (Persian) Course

This new class, developed by members of the GIHHR, is an eight week program offered through the University for three credits. The language aspect of the class is taught by Shaban Alaei, Professor of Persian Literature in Iran for over 50 years. Ali Alaei, an architect who taught Persian architecture and culture, is teaching the cultural sections of the class.

Graduate Course and Advanced Certificate in International Health and Human Rights

This course and certificate, provided by the institute in collaboration with Rockefeller College, helps students and working professionals learn and understand the complex field of health and human rights. This course promotes the GIHHR and the University on both a national and global level with an established program. The international relationships that Kamiar and Arash have fostered over the years will benefit this program and incentivize students to take part in it.

Health and Human Rights: an Interdisciplinary Approach

This course takes an interdisciplinary approach to health and human rights and the contemporary challenges and solutions associated with them. Arash and Kamiar Alaei teach this class to the University’s top academic students in the honors college. Through lectures, discussion and case studies, students develop a theoretical understanding of health as a human right, become familiar with policy and legal frameworks to support public health and acquire skills in the application and implementation of these concepts to evaluate and solve modern health challenges.

L-LC for Global Medicine and Human Rights

The LLC is a strong incentive for pre-med students to come to Albany. Students are exposed to the GIHHR and the services it provides, and, therefore, are able to gain firsthand knowledge and experience with the human rights side of medicine. This allows unique opportunities to participants of the L-LC, as they are exposed to a side of their profession they might not otherwise have considered.
Where We Work

The GIHHR engages in work in many regions around the world, which ranges from collaborative studies, research, policy reform and more. Listed are just some of these projects:

- **Afghanistan**—Advancing Structural Interventions to Address the Political Economy Surrounding Intravenous Drug Users. Research on HIV and Immigration.
- **Argentina**—Environmental Health Science Project in Buenos Aires
- **China**—Comparative study between China, Macau, Taiwan and Hong Kong on the impact of substance use on cultural diversity. Human rights research on therapy in prison.
- **Dominican Republic**—Study of risk factors among gang members and gangs as a key population.
- **Iraq**—Integration of mental health and maternal health services. Access to right to health for women.
- **Kazakhstan**—TB/HIV co-infections. Drug resistance.
- **Lebanon**—Development of interventions that prevent the spread of blood borne infections among IDU’s.
- **Pakistan**—Blood transfusion in Pakistan. The growing epidemic of Hepatitis C.
- **Sierra Leone**—Study on HIV and HCV among prisoners.
- **Syria**—Online Education for Displaced medical students.
- **Tajikistan**—Global Fund proposal for Reducing New HIV Infections and Integration of HIV Services into Primary Health Care. Study of risk factors among key populations.
- **Uganda**—HIV and Tuberculosis program in prison systems through AIDS Support Organization (TASO) in Uganda.
- **United Kingdom**—Additional research branch of the GIHHR established at the University of Glasgow.
- **United States**—HIV law project: analyze data from the Medical Monitoring Project (MMP). Understand the intersection between culture and disease treatment among New York Muslim communities. Track status of HIV testing among recently immigrated refugees.
Grants and Concept Papers

New Grants
New grants have been submitted and accepted this year and will be implemented in the coming months

- **OPEC Fund for International Development (OFID) – $350,000**
  “High Level Summit on HIV/AIDS for Key Stakeholders of Conservative Settings”
  Collaborated with the International AIDS Society to organize the Third High Level Consultation Meeting on HIV in Beirut, Lebanon to discuss rights of people living with HIV key populations.

- **Open Society Foundation – $234,000**
  “Police Associations Leading 21st Century Policing”
  In collaboration with NYS Police Department and Centro Civico

Ongoing Grants
These grants have been accepted and are currently in use for funding specific projects with the GIHHR.

- **USAID – $1,580,000**
  “Bridging the Gaps in Human Rights Law in Iran Through Enhancing Health Law Capacity”

- **USAID – $1,380,000**
  “Training in Leadership in Health, Environment, and Sustainable Development”

- **Amanat Foundation – $25,000**
  “Delivering Online Academic Courses for Displaced Syrian Students”

- **UAlbany Foundation – $25,000**
  The price of the Amanat grant was matched by the University

- **Anonymous Foundation – $20,000**

Submitted Grants
Submitted grants are under consideration for funding approval.

- **NIH – $275,000**
  “Aging with HIV/AIDS: developing a disability scale that measures up”

- “Planning an Academic Partnership: American University of Iraq, Sulaimani and University at Albany, State University of New York” – $45,000

Approved Concept Papers/Proposals
These concept papers were considered for funding and were invited for full proposal.

- **“Know Your Rights” - $1,080,000**
  Federal grant to provide justice for women and other marginalized populations

- **“Civil Society Strengthening Good Government and Accountability in Local Governments” - $1,900,000**
  In collaboration with NID, working to empower city councils through civic society
Publications and Conferences

“The Urgency to Mitigate the Spread of Hepatitis C in Pakistan Through Blood Transfusion Reform”

Authors: Kamiar Alaei, Mohammad Sarwar and Arash Alaei
Published by: International Journal of Health Policy and Management
http://www.ijhpm.com/article_3426_0.html?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter

Submitted Publications

“Factors associated with linkage to care for HIV patients in Tajikistan”
Submitted to: AIDS Care

“Gender and AIDS-related deaths in Tajikistan”
Submitted to: Women and Health

“Hepatitis C infection among people living with HIV/AIDS in Tajikistan”
Submitted to: Hepatitis Monthly

“Living in an urban area is associated with more frequent prevention of HIV transmission from mother to child in Tajikistan”
Submitted to: Maternal and Child Health Journal

“Real Impact of Human Rights Promotion on Protection of Health: A Cross-Country Analysis”
Submitted to: Bulletin of the World Health Organization

“Social support and demographic factors associated with drug resistant TB among people living with HIV in Kazakhstan”
Submitted to: International Journal of Health Policy and Management

“Women’s Rights, Health and Development: An Analysis of the Correlation Between the Protection of Women’s Economic and Social Rights, with Health Improvement and Sustainable Development”
Submitted to: BMJ Open

Conferences

July 23-26—Kamiar presented his work, “PrEP usage is related to increased STD rates” at the annual conference for the International AIDS Society in Paris. He wrote the work with GIHHR researcher Chris Paynter.

October 9-10—Arash and Kamiar presented at a virtual conference held to discuss refugee rights. The meeting consisted of collaborators in Australia, Switzerland and Virginia.

November 3-5—At the 2017 National Student Conference, Kamiar presented on human rights and medicine. The conference was held at Georgetown University in Washington.

National Upcoming Events

December 1—10th Annual Dupont Summit on Science, Technology, and Environmental Policy
Arash and Kamiar will participate in this meeting discussing various topics on health and human rights.

December 7-8—Committee on Human Rights of the U.S. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine: Protecting the Rights of Individuals Fleeing Conflict
Arash and Kamiar will present on the right to education, and their founding of the Syrian Education Program.
Announcements

A message from co-founder Dr. Arash Alaei:

Greetings from Dushanbe, Tajikistan!

As you may know, I have been working with the Ministry of Health of Tajikistan to lead the team to develop their national strategy for the Global Fund to Control HIV/AIDS. I am pleased to announce that the proposal, which has a special focus to promote and protect the rights of key populations including women, LGBT, injecting drug users and prisoners, has been awarded with the amount of $13 million to be implemented in Tajikistan.

Given my familial and cultural ties to the Middle East, I have decided to travel to Tajikistan to serve as Special Adviser to the Ministry of Health and the USAID/CDC Consultant. Through this position, I will assist in the implementation of their Global Fund program for at least one year, and will be based part time in Albany and part time in Tajikistan and Turkey. Because of this work, I will be unable to continue my current administrative position as a staff member at the University at Albany, and I am announcing my resignation as co-Director at GIHHR and UAlbany staff.

I have mixed feelings about this new chapter in my life. I am excited about the work opportunity, but I also have great sadness about stepping down as a co-director at GIHHR. It has been a great honor to work with you all over the past several years, and I am grateful to each of you for this opportunity. I look forward to hearing about the great work that GIHHR will accomplish. Moving forward, I wish my brother Kamiar the best and give him my full support as he continues to lead this great Institute in undertaking important work.

Again, thank you for your amazing work and dedication.

Best,

Arash Alaei
Christopher Paynter

Chris majored in biochemistry and psychology at Stony Brook University, where he graduated summa cum laude. He went on to receive a PhD in psychology from Carnegie Mellon University. Currently, he is working on several projects related to risk behaviors for HIV transmission at GIHHR. One of these projects involves correlations between the use of Truvada and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. Truvada is a drug that reduces the likelihood of getting HIV following unprotected sex, and there are concerns that increasing Truvada access will lead to increased spread of STDs other than HIV. Chris analyzed CDC data and Medicaid claims data and found that expanded Truvada usage was strongly correlated with increases in rates of gonorrhea. This research was presented at the International AIDS Society conference last July.

In addition, Chris is helping supervise interns at the GIHHR in researching the risk behaviors for HIV transmission among at-risk populations in Pakistan. This research will focus on survey data regarding the activities of injection drug users, sex workers, and transgender individuals. The goal of the research is to identify possible reasons for the increase in HIV incidence in Pakistan in recent years, as well as help inform the development of new prevention guidelines.

Lindsey Riback

Lindsey is currently pursuing her Master’s in Public Health candidate at UAlbany’s school of Public Health with a concentration in Epidemiology. This past summer, Lindsey was the Communications Intern for Physician’s for Human Rights in New York City. There, she was able to combine her interest in public health and human rights with her experience in journalism. At PHR, she was responsible for editing press releases and tracking human rights news stories around the world, specifically Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria and Turkey.

Besides for their work on documenting attacks on medical facilities in Syria, PHR is known for their Asylum Network which trains medical professionals on how to properly document incidences of human rights violations which allow survivors to be granted asylum in the U.S. While at PHR Lindsey was able to interview Dr. Spyros Orfanos, a new member of the Asylum Network who was interested in creating a partnership between PHR and his postdoctoral clinic at New York University’s program in psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. During the interview, he explained how the current political climate and his family history sparked his interest in having PHR train his clinicians to better serve those seeking asylum in the United States.

Currently, Lindsey is working as a graduate research assistant at GIHHR. Since the beginning of the semester Lindsey has been working on resubmitting an NIH grant titled "Aging with HIV/AIDS: developing a disability scale that measures up." Additionally, she has been working alongside other research assistants to prepare for another NIH grant to develop interventions that prevent the spread of blood borne infections among IDU’s in Lebanon.
Staff and Interns

Co-Founders
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Arash Alaei

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September Johnson
Michelle DeOcampo

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Mahmoud Aldyab
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Shannon Moquin
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Kira Oliver
Paul Pangburn
Sam Quetchenbach
Sophia Roberts
Miriam Toro
Joe Walsh

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Molly Eve
Ambra Giuliano
Chandan Kang
John Paul Leach
Alexandra Reisig
Thea Ridley-Castle
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