

ALBANIA: BREAKING CYCLE OF PROSTITUTION

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A few brave individuals are tackling the trade in women that's devastating rural communities.

By Agim Kanani in Tirana

In the arrivals hall at Rinas International Airport, young Albanian women hurry past, showing telltale signs of beatings by pimps. They are caught in the cycle of international prostitution. No sooner are they flown home than they have to return to red light districts in Western Europe. The women are not keen to talk, still less to explain their bruises. "I had a car accident," said one with two missing teeth and a bruise on her cheek. A second, named Silvana, will not explain the scar on her lip and her bruised jaw. Another with similar injuries said, "I slipped in the bathroom".

Aid agencies estimate 30,000 Albanian prostitutes work across Europe. They comprise almost 1 per cent of Albania's population. At least 60 per cent are children, most abducted or tricked into prostitution in one of the worst trafficking rackets on the continent. "Do not expect them to tell you the truth," a policeman at the airport says. "Each returnee wants to go back to Italy. This is not just because of their pimps' threats, it is because their families won't accept them. One of them told me, 'I don't want to return home as my father would beat me up'."

These women have few prospects back in Albania. In the Albanian section of its annual report last year, the US State Department said they faced "significant stigmatisation from their families and society". It went on, "Given the scope of the trafficking problem and limited resources to address reintegration, most victims of trafficking receive little or no assistance."

Many border police show no sympathy to such women, seeing them as criminals rather than victims. As soon as they get off the plane, most are already preparing to travel back to Italy on clandestine speedboats. With 10 to 15 such vessels leaving each night from the port of Vlora alone, the right payment always secures a seat. But some shelters are now opening to help these women break out of the cycle of prostitution and reintegrate with the community. Secret refuges have opened in Tirana and Vlora. In Fier, central Albania, the local police chief, Xhavit Shala, has built a basic refuge in his station compound.

"Albanians need to learn to treat these women as victims and not prostitutes," said Shala, who is keen to break the power of the traffickers. He held meetings with teachers, business leaders and residents to explain how the traffic in prostitutes is wrecking village life. The results were startling. Complaints against pimps and traffickers jumped by almost 400 per cent. Shala started his temporary shelter in the police compound to safeguard women while police developed cases against their pimps.

When the government declined to fund the refuge, he raised the 18,000 US dollars he needed from local businesses. The three metal edifices hold only a few bunk beds and school desks. But the rooms are clean and the surrounding wire fence protects a small yard.

One problem facing Shala is that some of those in his care leave because the courts take too long to bring their pimps to trial. He has asked the justice ministry to speed up the cases but has yet to receive a response. The authorities also refused to pay for the women's food at the shelter. "I am no longer asking officials for any help," Shala said. "I am only asking them to stop putting obstacles in our way."

His refuge tries to persuade the women's families to take them back. "We tell them it is not only their daughter's responsibility for falling into prostitution but their own," Shala explained. "The statistics show that their daughters were deceived into becoming prostitutes. We ask why their families permitted them to be deceived."

Since it opened last December, the Vlora project has cared for 40 girls and reunited most with their families. But the shelter's benefactor, who asked not to be named, said the pimps' influence should never be underestimated and she herself had been directly threatened. "The job horrifies me," she said.

Even when families take their daughters back, it is rarely a long-term solution. "Sometimes I visit the girls and I don't find them at home anymore," she continued. "Girls trafficked in this way have little hope of re-establishing a normal life."

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