

INVESTIGATION

Albanian women trafficked in EU: abused, rejected, abandoned



Tens of thousands of women are believed to be trafficked into Western Europe from the Balkans (Photo: Kat Northern Lights Man)

By **LINDITA CELA**

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Abused by gangsters, disowned by their families, and let down by the state, Albanian women who were trafficked as sex slaves face an uphill battle to build new lives.

The area around the Place de l'Yser in Brussels is the Albanian sex workers' patch. Their territory is just a couple of kilometres from the city's central square, the Grand Place, where thousands of tourists flock every day, and from the EU institutions.

After a coffee at a corner cafe around midday, the women wait for clients on the streets. Ten minutes of sex costs no more than €50.

Voluptuous, with long curly hair and big black eyes, 31-year old Eva speaks without embarrassment about the clients she goes with, how much she charges, sexual positions and even the fights among the women who share the street.

"I first came here with my fiance 14 years ago," recalls Eva (a pseudonym, like the names of all current or former sex workers in this story). The man she had fallen for told her she needed to make a "sacrifice for the sake of our love" - to have sex with other men to earn some money for them as a couple.



The US accuses Albanian authorities of failing to tackle sex-trafficking (Photo: asp.gov.al)

Without realising, at first, what was happening, Eva had become a victim of sex trafficking - or, as it is more formally known, trafficking in women for sexual exploitation.

There may be as many as 140,000 sex-trafficking victims in Europe and around a third come from the Balkans, according to a [UN report from 2010](#).

Thousands of women and girls have been trafficked from Albania alone to western Europe as sex slaves in the last two decades. Well-organised criminal gangs control the trafficking, sometimes with the complicity of the victims' own family members, and launder profits by buying property back in Albania, police and experts say.

Efforts to crack down on the gangs face serious obstacles. Complex international investigations are required and it is widely accepted that criminals can buy influence in the justice system of Albania, one of Europe's poorest countries.

"Corruption and high rates of turnover within the police force inhibit law enforcement action to address trafficking. Official complicity in trafficking crimes remains a significant concern," says the section on Albania in the US State Department's [2015 Trafficking in Persons Report](#).

It also notes that when the report was published, in July, "a sitting member of [the Albanian] parliament had prior convictions for trafficking-related crimes".

Meanwhile, many victims who escape from the gangs end up back in the sex trade after being shunned by their own families and communities and after receiving only modest help from the Albanian state to build a new life.

Abused by their families

A previously unpublished Albanian police report from 2007, obtained by the Balkan Investigative

Reporting Network, BIRN, says at least 5,162 women and girls were trafficked to be exploited as sex workers between 1992 and 2005.

Some 22% were minors when they were trafficked, 7% of all victims were kidnapped, raped, or had their families threatened, 4% were sold into forced prostitution by their own families.

Since the period covered by the report, around 1,000 more trafficking victims have been identified, according to annual crime reports issued by the Albanian state prosecutor.

Sobering as they are, the statistics tell only a small fraction of a bigger story. The true number of victims is likely to be much higher, as the official figures only include women known to authorities.

The numbers, in any case, hardly convey what each individual woman has suffered.

Interviews with trafficked women reveal that, in some cases, they were subjected to violence and sexual abuse by members of their own families.

"One night my dad drank a lot and sometime after two o'clock I found myself naked and he was over me," recalls Vera, a 27-year old woman at the Different & Equal charity centre in Tirana, which offers help to trafficking victims.

"I felt totally numb ... and left home with the first man who promised to marry me and who, the moment we arrived on the outskirts of Tirana, forced me to have sex with other men for money," she says.

She adds, between sobs, that her father raped her so often that she does not remember how many times he did it.

Vera's mother took her own life in 2009. Police believe she committed suicide after discovering her husband was sexually abusing their daughter.

Maria, from the Malesia e Madhe region in northern Albania, was only 16 when her father married her to an older man. Her new husband forced her into prostitution in Greece.

"Every night, it was like I was being raped," she recalls in another centre for trafficking victims, in the city of Elbasan. "When I told my mum, she would scream that I couldn't go back home, telling me that I had walked out of that door for good."

Elsa, from the northern town of Kukes, became a target of her father's rage after her mother died when she was six.

"When he would return home, he would beat me with a water hose just because I existed," she says in a low voice, as if still gripped by fear.

After being raped by her brother at the age of 13, she ran away and was forced to work as a prostitute, first in Tirana and later in Kosovo.

"No one understands the pain of passing through the hands of many people, of going through these things in your family, of losing your innocence without knowing why," she says at a centre for trafficking victims in the town of Vlora.

"No one taught me what love is, what right and wrong are. I've been stigmatised since I was a child and as far as everyone's concerned I'll always be a whore."

Low conviction rates

In their 2007 report, Albanian police identified more than 2,000 people suspected of trafficking over the past decade and a half. But only 23% of them were in prison, in Albania, or abroad, for trafficking or other crimes.

Tougher sentences for human trafficking of between 10 and 15 years in jail were introduced in Albania in 2013 but the number of convictions has been small. Albania convicted nine people of trafficking in 2014 and three people the previous year, according to the US State Department.

Some convicted traffickers manage to avoid jail by pursuing appeals.

Hysni Sokolaj, a 43-year old man from the town of Tropoje, was found guilty in absentia in 2011 of human trafficking and prostitution. He was sentenced to 20 years in prison. His conviction was upheld by a higher court, but later overturned by the Supreme Court.

Sokolaj was accused of deceiving an 18-year old woman with false promises of love and marriage, and then of trafficking her and forcing her into prostitution in Belgium and in the UK, according to a copy of his case file obtained by BIRN.

In 2006, after he was deported from Britain as an illegal alien, the woman returned to Albania, found refuge at the centre for trafficking victims in Vlora and filed charges against him.

"When she came she was traumatised, fearing her pimp, who had threatened to kill her brothers," recalls Enkelejda Abdylaj, a coordinator at the centre.

"She was ashamed to say what had happened to her and felt guilty for running away from home with him [Sokolaj]."

The case against Sokolaj was first registered in the prosecutor's office in Fier, which refused to start criminal proceedings against him, saying it could not collect any evidence. Following protests from victims' support groups, the case was transferred to the Serious Crimes Prosecutor's Office in Tirana.

The office brought charges against Sokolaj, who was believed to have returned to Britain, and an international warrant was issued for his arrest. In 2012, British police declared Sokolaj one of the most wanted foreign nationals in the country.

But in December the same year, the Supreme Court overturned his conviction, saying the lower courts had deliberately misinterpreted the law.

Sokolaj's lawyer, Ferit Muca, says his client, who does not live in Albania any more, has always maintained he is not guilty.

"The Supreme Court delivered justice because my client was innocent," he says.

"He lived with the accuser and didn't traffic her. The charges against him were filed on the basis of manipulations by prosecutors. The girl was unstable."

Family business

One recent case investigated by serious crimes prosecutors in Tirana involves two brothers, Bledar and Shyqeri Stafuga, aged 33 and 24, respectively.

Two courts found them guilty of being part of a criminal gang which trafficked at least six young women into sexual slavery. The Supreme Court is considering an appeal against their conviction.

One woman testified that she was only 16 years old when Shyqeri Stafuga trafficked her to Switzerland and Germany and forced her to have sex with 10 men every day.

"He put a knife to my throat; he would stub out his cigarette on my body ... He would threaten to kill my family if I didn't make 1,000 [Swiss] francs every night," she said.

In November 2014, Bledar and Shyqeri Stafuga were convicted of human trafficking and trafficking of minors by the Court of Serious Crimes in Tirana and sentenced to 12 and a half and 12 years in prison, respectively.

Anila Trimi, an anti-trafficking expert with the Albanian state police, tells BIRN the brothers were part of a larger, well-structured criminal organisation and investigations continue into other possible members of the group.

Dolores Musabelliu, a prosecutor in the Serious Crimes Prosecutor's Office, says human trafficking and prostitution cases are difficult to prove in court.

"The reasons behind the failure of many cases is that prosecutors base their charges only on the testimony of the victim," she says.

However, victims often decide not to testify or withdraw testimony because they cannot face a drawn-out court case and fear vengeance from the traffickers.

"So I denounced him and what did I gain?," asks Lola, a 21-year old woman from a small village north of Tirana, who filed criminal charges against her pimp in late 2014 and who lives in Albania's only state-run shelter for trafficking victims.

"He knows where I live, knows everything about me and is still free," she says.

Asset unfreeze

The Albanian government's national anti-trafficking strategy, approved in November 2014, named Belgium as one of the main destinations in Western Europe for Albanian women trafficked for prostitution.

In Brussels, Didier Dochain, the deputy head of the federal police's anti-trafficking unit, told BIRN the Belgian authorities are focusing increasingly on trying to seize the assets of foreign traffickers.

"This is the motivation, of course, of all these criminal activities - it's to gain illegal profit and so if we can cut, seize, confiscate ... this profit, then it's a good thing," Dochain said.

But, he added, traffickers generally send their profits back to their home countries so Belgian police needed cooperation from authorities there.

"They invest in land, houses, expensive cars and things like that and they live a good life back in their own country," he says. "They can live as barons or princes because they make a big profit and big money but the problem is first of all to trace this illegal money flow."

Unfortunately, Dochain says, the response from foreign authorities in many cases is that they cannot find the money. Often this is because financial transactions were not recorded as thoroughly as they are in Belgium, he explains, but he cannot rule out that corruption also plays a role.

Back in Tirana, Dolores Musabelliu at the prosecutor's office says Albanian authorities face their own problems getting information from foreign countries for complex investigations.

"Investigating these cases depends on legal assistance requests, to which the responses are often late, and this is often the reason cases are dismissed," she says.

While some officials and MPs work to counter sex trafficking, two Albanian politicians have been accused of active involvement in it.

Belgian prosecutors have accused Mark Frroku, a lawmaker from the Christian Democratic Party, of murdering another Albanian in Brussels in 1999. The victim was allegedly blackmailing a woman who was exploited by a prostitution ring run by a brother of Frroku.

An Albanian court is considering a Belgian request for Frroku's extradition. Frroku has denied any wrongdoing and described the charges against him as politically motivated.

Arben Ndoka, who served as a member of parliament from the ruling Socialist Party, has admitted he was convicted by an Italian court in the 1990s for running prostitutes and kidnapping.

Ndoka made the admission last year after his criminal record was exposed by the opposition. But he maintained that he was innocent of the charges and stayed on in parliament, before eventually resigning in September 2015.

Shunned by society

Even though they are victims, many women who have been trafficked and forced into prostitution are disowned by their own families and stigmatised by society.

The mother of the woman who was allegedly being blackmailed in the Frroku case lives in the small town of Puka in mountainous northern Albania.

Her home is a ground floor flat in an old apartment block. She is 63 years old, but looks much older, with dark rings around her eyes. For her, any connection with the sex trade is a source of shame. As far as she is concerned, she no longer has a daughter.

"I don't know what happened to her," she says, standing on her doorstep. "All I know is what I've heard in the news."

Over the past 25 years, 83 young women and girls from Puka have been trafficked into prostitution, according to local police. Their stories are still the talk of a town of just 3,600 inhabitants.



Zajmira Laci, a doctor and women's rights activist in Puka

Zajmira Laci, a local doctor and women's rights activist, says that, just like the woman in the Frroku case, many trafficking victims have never returned to Puka.

"Because of the shame, their families don't accept them," Laci says. "Girls also haven't returned because they fear everyone will be pointing fingers at them."

Road to rehabilitation

Many Western countries now have well-resourced programmes to help victims of trafficking make a fresh start.

In the Belgian city of Antwerp, Patsy Sorensen, the director of Payoke, a charity that helps trafficking victims, can point to dozens of examples of women reintegrating into Belgian society.

The women can request a work permit and can attend education and training courses free of charge, Sorensen explains. They also receive a basic income of around €800/month even if they are not working.

"They have a lot of possibilities to rebuild their lives and most of them like to work as quickly as possible," Sorensen says.

Women she knows have found work as cleaners and shop assistants. Others have started nail studios, Sorensen says. Others yet, including some Albanian women, have gone to university.

However, Sorensen admits, there are cases where women have ended up being trafficked again.



Patsy Sorensen, director of the Payoke anti-trafficking organisation in Antwerp

In Albania, after women are identified as trafficking victims, they are generally referred to the state-run shelter or one of three rehabilitation centres.

The shelter in the village of Linze, near Tirana, houses victims awaiting the results of preliminary investigations. The centres in Tirana, Elbasan and Vlora are run by non-profit organisations and offer courses in skills such as cookery and hairdressing with the aim of helping women find employment.

The US State Department's 2015 human trafficking report says psychological, medical, and reintegration services at the shelter are inadequate and the government has not given enough money - even though it could have used a special crime prevention fund which held at least 25 million lek (about €180,000).

But even after going through rehabilitation programmes, trafficking victims struggle to find work.

"We've had only one case of employment in a state institution and this was due to our mediation," says Enkelejda Avdyllaj, the coordinator at the Vatra centre in Vlora.

"We talk to businesses, but when we tell them the profile of the employee they refuse to hire them."

If trafficking victims are able to find a job, even a poorly paid one, they still suffer the stigma attached to their former lives.

Diana Kaso, executive director of the Another Vision centre in Elbasan, says that 80% of the women who go through its rehabilitation programmes aim to rebuild their lives away from their home towns.

Maria, the woman who was forced into prostitution in Greece, is following that path.

She lives in a city far from her birthplace with her 12-year-old son, whom she says is the only source of joy in her life.

After a rehabilitation programme, she worked for years as a cleaning lady in bars and is now a pastry chef on a monthly salary of about €110, half of which goes on rent.

"Many people have tried to exploit my misfortune rather than help," she says. When she goes to a government office to claim a small payment for trafficking victims, officials ask for sex, Maria says. "It's scary to enter an office."

Kaso says that few women have the strength Maria has shown to build a new life.

Of all the cases she has handled, about 100 women have ended up back in prostitution.

"Sometimes they don't have the necessary support or they think that because of the stigma they have no other options," Kaso explains.

At the Place de l'Yser in Brussels, Eva is one of those women who reached that conclusion. She first lived in Belgium for five years with her fiance-cum-pimp, until he disappeared with all their

money.

Eva returned to Albania for a while but decided to go back to Belgium and work again in the sex trade. This allows her to send money back to her family, who think she is a care worker for an elderly couple.

"In Albania, there was no job for me," Eva says. "The only job that I know how to do is this one. And here I can earn much more."

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