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Ramaj, K  (2021) The Aftermath of Human Trafficking: Exploring the Albanian Victims' Return, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration Challenges. *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 9 (3). pp. 408-429. ISSN 2332-2705

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2021.1920823>

Publisher: Taylor & Francis

Version: Published Version

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Additional Information: This is an Open Access article published in *Journal of Human Trafficking*, by Taylor & Francis.

Data Access Statement: The data that support the findings of this study are in the form of Albanian transcripts and reside with the corresponding author, Klea Ramaj. The data are not publicly available since they contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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Klea Ramaj

To cite this article: Klea Ramaj (2023) The Aftermath of Human Trafficking: Exploring the Albanian Victims' Return, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration Challenges, Journal of Human Trafficking, 9:3, 408-429, DOI: [10.1080/23322705.2021.1920823](https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2021.1920823)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2021.1920823>



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The Aftermath of Human Trafficking: Exploring the Albanian Victims' Return, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration Challenges

Klea Ramaj 

Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

ABSTRACT

Since the collapse of communism in the 1990s, Albanian women and children have been increasingly trafficked in countries across Europe. While extensive literature addresses the organizational structure and the factors making human trafficking thrive, the experiences of victims of human trafficking upon their return to their home countries is a commonly under-represented concern. This article addresses the present gap in research by exploring the rehabilitation and reintegration challenges faced by Albanian victims of sex trafficking and forced begging upon their return to Albania, as reflected by 15 professionals providing direct assistance to the victims. The fieldwork was conducted in three Albanian cities and all four organizations responsible for the rehabilitation and reintegration of trafficking victims in Albania participated in the study. Data from the interviews with practitioners indicate that most victims returned involuntarily to Albania. During the rehabilitation and reintegration process, victims encountered numerous challenges on individual, familial, social, economic, legal, and institutional levels. Findings suggest that following their return to Albania, victims are perplexed regarding their self-identity, face health problems, criminal prosecutions, familial exclusion, and stigmatization, and lack support in gaining economic independence, feeling safe, and accessing justice.

KEYWORDS



Victims; voluntary and involuntary return; rehabilitation; reintegration; human trafficking; Albania

Short Statement

The promotion of voluntary return of trafficking victims is one of the main long-term strategic goals of the Albanian government (Ministria e Brendshme, 2016a). However, for this goal to materialize, two steps need to be taken. First, victims would need to be genuinely volunteering their return and second, victims would have to be provided with all the necessary means for a successful reintegration. Understanding the return and reintegration challenges from the victims' perspective would not only help the Albanian government design better policies, but it would also contribute in ameliorating victims' post-trafficking lives by strengthening their position in the Albanian society and by preventing further re-trafficking and re-victimization. Such an aim is also in line with Goal 16 of the UN SDGs, namely the promotion of just, peaceful, and inclusive societies. Consistent with the recommendations set forth by the Human Trafficking Foundation (2018), voluntary return should be facilitated as safely as possible and followed by effective and appropriate reintegration assistance in the country of origin.

Introduction

Human trafficking is an abuse of an individual's rights and dignity, involving the exploitation of vulnerable persons through the use of fraud, force, threat, or deception for the sole purpose of

CONTACT Klea Ramaj  kr451@cam.ac.uk  Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge, Sidgwick Avenue, Cambridge CB3 9DA, UK

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economic gain (Europol, 2016; United Nations [UN], 2000). It is one of the fastest growing areas of criminal activity worldwide, with women and children from developing countries being the ones most affected (International Labor Organization [ILO], 2017; Kleemans & Smit, 2014; Troshynski, 2011).

Albania is one of the key origin countries for the trafficking of women and children to Western Europe (Eurostat, 2015; GRETA, 2016). Despite the pervasiveness of such phenomenon, scholars have not dedicated adequate attention to the issue of human trafficking in Albania, with the main data regarding the problem being portrayed by international and local institutions' reports (e.g. International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2015; GRETA, 2016; Vatra, 2017; Home Office, 2018). Within a handful of articles and book chapters published about Albanian human trafficking, the focus has predominately been on structured networks (Leman & Janssens, 2006), patterns of recruitment (Gjermeni et al., 2008b), and factors that influenced the increase in trafficking following the collapse of communism during the 1990s (Hysi, 2007; Van Hook et al., 2006). To date, no studies have investigated the return and reintegration process of trafficking victims to Albania (Ministria e Brendshme, 2016b). Not knowing the victims' challenges undermines efforts to improve their situation. Such lack of evidence-based analysis is concerning particularly in light of the U.S. Department of State's (2018) conclusion that the Albanian government does not meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and assistance of victims.

The aim of this article is to address the present gap in research by exploring the challenges of Albanian victims of human trafficking upon their return to Albania, as conveyed by practitioners providing direct assistance to them. It focuses on victims exploited for sexual purposes and forced begging. Even though internal trafficking in Albania has been rising in recent years (Meshi et al., 2009), the primary focus of this article is on Albanian victims who have been trafficked internationally. It was hypothesized that this group of victims is the most disadvantageous one for two main reasons. First, victims trafficked internationally tend to be recruited by powerful criminal networks, which are linked to other transnational crimes, including drug trafficking and the corruption of government officials (Hodge & Lietz, 2007; Richard, 1999). Contrastingly, victims trafficked internally are usually exploited by small groups of unorganized individuals. Second, the researcher wished to capture both the experiences of return and reintegration. Crossing international borders and returning from a developed country to a developing country of origin poses a greater challenge than movement within national borders. The theoretical framework guiding this work is based on the victim-centered approach. A victim-centered approach to trafficking implies the re-direction of the spotlight of attention from the fight of organized crime to the victims' needs and rights (Antkowiak, 2011; Goodey, 2004a, 2008). At present, victim-centered justice policy is commonly adopted without an insight into what victims really need and want. As such, Goodey (2004b) proposes that academic research should play a greater role than it currently does in reviewing policy developments that are purportedly "for" victims and their expressed preferences. Hence, this article portrays the return, rehabilitation, and reintegration post-trafficking challenges through the victims' perspective, both experientially and chronologically.

The article starts by reviewing the legal and theoretical literature on the return and reintegration of trafficking victims. It then details the methodological steps in implementing this study in three different Albanian cities – Tirana, Elbasan, and Vlora. The article then presents the results from interviews with service providers. These results are grouped in three main sections: 1) An exploration of trafficking victims' initial challenges upon their return to Albania; 2) An analysis of the victims' socio-economic problems; and 3) An overview of the legal and institutional barriers faced by victims. The article draws on the theoretical umbrella of critical victimology, which posits that harm and the granting of victimhood is contingent upon the social and structural contexts in which victims are embedded (Mawby & Walklate, 1994). In the end, the article draws preliminary conclusions about the findings, highlights the limitations, and suggests avenues for future research.

Literature Review

Victims of any kind have always generated feelings of compassion, with the more defenseless victims being the primary targets of altruistic human sentiments (Fattah, 2016). However, victimization is not an objective reality and what a victim experiences almost never matches the legal and social interpretations of victimization (Spencer, 2011; Walklate, 2012). The following sub-sections reflect on the contrast between the seemingly victim-centered legal measures and theoretical discussions of return and reintegration, and the tangible reality as experienced by victims.

Understanding Return and Reintegration

The Legal and Institutional Framework

In the trafficking context, the term return refers to the process of returning trafficking victims from the country in which they were identified to their country of origin (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2014). On an international legal level, the return process is addressed in Article 8 of the Palermo Protocol (UN, 2000). This article provides that the return of a trafficking victim should be conducted “with due regard for the safety of that person” (Article 8.1) and “shall preferably be voluntary” (Article 8.2). Voluntary return involves obtaining the consent of the returnee, confirming that the consent is given free of coercion, and ensuring that it is based on accurate information that describes potential risks and alternative options to return (IOM, 2012). The reference to “preferably voluntary” in the Palermo Protocol is however problematic. Given that the nature and quality of destination countries’ obligation is unclear, it is plausible to argue that such a clause is meaningless in both practical and legal terms (Gallagher, 2010). Since taking into consideration the voluntariness of trafficking victims is not mandatory, transit and destination countries forcibly return victims more often than not (Segrave, 2009; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2009). Research has shown that forced return to the country of origin has serious consequences for trafficking victims (Adams, 2011; Prina, 2003). For example, a recent IOM study found that trafficked persons who had been forcibly returned to their countries of origin were more vulnerable to re-trafficking (Jobe, 2010). When returning to their countries of origin, victims face the same adverse conditions that contributed to their trafficking vulnerabilities (Le, 2017; Paasche et al., 2018).

A critical aspect of safe return is supported reintegration, given that trafficking victims who are supported with reintegration assistance are less vulnerable to intimidation and social isolation (Gallagher, 2010). Even though the Palermo Protocol does not refer to reintegration, a large number of non-binding international guidelines have emerged since 2000 to encourage policy approaches in the best interest of the victim (see IOM, 2007; Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2002; UNODC, 2006, 2008). Following these guidelines, the services offered to the victims should cover basic needs such as shelter, medical, psychological, and legal assistance in the short-term, and professional training, job placement, accommodation, and reunification with the family and community in the long-term. Nevertheless, victim assistance in the origin country, where the victim is returned, is often inadequate (European Commission [EC], 2004). Research has shown that these programs are not always sufficiently funded to address the full range of victims’ needs, particularly in the long-term (Jobe, 2010; Simeunovic-Patic, 2005).

The Theoretical Level

A persistent finding in research that examines the theoretical dimensions of trafficking victims’ return and reintegration is the pervasiveness of a linear trajectory (Segrave et al., 2009). Much of the available research notes three phases in the trafficking experience: 1) initial safety in the origin country, 2) exploitation in the destination country, and 3) back to safety in the country of domicile (Schloenhardt & Loong, 2011). Returning home is thus often parallelized with safety (Sharma, 2003). However, the idea of home as a safe place is complicated by the fact that many victims return to similar

disadvantageous economic, social, and familial situations that pushed them into trafficking in the first place (Le, 2017).

Derks (1998) argues that reintegration of a trafficking victim is more than a geographical movement back to the origin country. It is rather a phased process of recovery, where the focus is on a “positive movement from an undesirable state to a more desirable condition” (Reimer et al., 2007, p. 47). Scholars agree that reintegration takes place at different levels: at an individual level, within the trafficked person’s family environment, within the wider community, and within the overarching formal society (Pandey et al., 2013; Surtees, 2010; Surtees et al., 2016). Thus, reintegration consists of a long-term and multi-faceted process that is incomplete until the person becomes an active member of the economic, cultural, social, and political life of his/her country (Zimmerman, 2007). The term “reintegration” is however not without its problems, since it implies that the individual was integrated in society prior to being trafficked. In many cases, trafficked persons have never experienced social integration due to economic or social marginalization in their countries of origin (Aronowitz, 2015; Surtees, 2008). Studies have found that the problems faced by victims prior to being trafficked are inextricably linked to their reintegration challenges (e.g., Lyneham, 2014).

Many scholars agree that reintegration programs offered by NGOs in the form of psychological, legal, economic, or medical assistance are important in helping victims reintegrate in their communities (e.g., McCarthy, 2018; Surtees, 2017). Nevertheless, Bearup (2016) maintains that the notion of reintegration as a provision of formal assistance is a form of narrow prescription. According to him, such procedural delivery of assistance leaves little room for focusing on the role of informal networks and “the socio-cultural processes implicated in the substantive achievement of reintegration and the rebuilding of relationships” (p. 168). Moreover, Bearup (2016) claims that the prevalence of assisted protection may increase dependency and minimize the agency of the victim being reintegrated. This notion is also implicitly supported by Surtees (2006), who posits that the victims’ empowerment, independence, and self-sufficiency are central aspects of a successful reintegration.

To reiterate, a plethora of legal frameworks and theories suggest various conceptualizations of the terms “return” and “reintegration”. Nevertheless, the existent literature has placed less importance on how returned victims themselves experience their post-trafficking lives (Lisborg & Plambech, 2009; Surtees, 2007). This research gap is also explicitly acknowledged by the Albanian Ministry of the Interior: “Currently, there are no comprehensive studies – either qualitative or quantitative – on the return and reintegration of trafficking victims in Albania” (Ministria e Brendshme, 2016b, p. 13).

Methodology

Albanian Anti-Trafficking Shelters and Access

There are four institutions offering rehabilitation and reintegration services to trafficking victims in Albania. Three are NGOs: Different and Equal (D & E) in Tirana, Vatra Psycho-Social Center in Vlora, and Another Vision in Elbasan. The fourth is the National Reception Center for Trafficking Victims (NRCTV) in Tirana (Gjermeni et al., 2008a; GRETA, 2016). All four institutions agreed to participate in the research. Fieldwork was carried out in May 2019 and lasted three weeks.

Sample Selection

The initial plan was to conduct 20 interviews, 10 with service-providers and 10 with victims who had been trafficked outside Albania. However, studies on human trafficking involve several methodological challenges and there are certain limitations to what is possible (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2013; Cwikel & Hoban, 2005). In the present case, it was not possible to interview victims due to their fear of being

Table 1. Background data on practitioners.

ID	Profession/Current position	Years of work experience with victims of human trafficking
SW1	Social worker with a coordinating role	2 years
SW2	Social worker with a coordinating role	17 years
SW3	Social worker/project manager	14 years
SW4	Social worker/project manager	17 years
SW5	Social worker	3 years
SW6	Social worker	4 years
SW7	Social worker with a coordinating role	4 years
PSY1	Psychologist	2 years and a half
PSY2	Psychologist	10 years
PSY3	Psychologist	3 years and 3 months
PSY4	Psychologist with a directing role	3 years and a half
PSY5	Psychologist	3 years
LAW1	Lawyer	1 year and a half
LAW2	Lawyer	5 years
MED	General medical practitioner	3 years

stigmatized. Such sentiment is also supported by Siegel and De Wildt (2015), who argue that interviewing trafficking victims is impeded by their “urge for self-preservation” (p. 11).¹

Hence, another approach was taken and the target number of interviews with practitioners was increased.² As noted by Baker and Edwards (2012), the answer to “how many participants are enough” is influenced by numerous outside determinants. In this case, the external limitation was the sampling frame (Bachman & Schutt, 2017). The scale of the system handling the reintegration of trafficking victims in Albania is small, with the number of professionals working in each organization ranging from 9 to 15. Purposive sampling was used to select a total of 15 professionals – who had worked directly with trafficking victims – from all four organizations.

The main criterion was to interview at least three different professionals from each organization in order to capture the multi-faceted challenges faced by the victims. The distribution of interviews between different professional categories was as follows: social workers (7), psychologists (5), lawyers (2), and medical doctor (1). The experience that each interviewee had in offering direct assistance to trafficking victims ranged from one year and a half to seventeen years (see Table 1). The final sample represented all the actors who were directly involved in the rehabilitation and reintegration process of trafficking victims in Albania. For example, all the psychologists of all four institutions were included in the study and in two cases the sole lawyer of the organization was interviewed.

Data Collection

Data collection was carried out via semi-structured interviews. This approach allowed for some consistency in the number of themes to be covered, whilst at the same time leaving room for successive questions to follow up on the interviewee’s responses (Maxfield & Babbie, 2018). The interviews took place in designated offices and lasted from 40 to 65 minutes. All interviews were conducted in Albanian and transcribed in whole within five days of having been conducted.

Even though the integration of the victims’ voice was not possible, understanding the victims’ challenges through the interviews with professionals was beneficial in three main ways. First, practitioners had gained the victims’ trust, knew their stories in detail, and had seen the victims’ challenges

¹Victims often self-censor because of fear of reprisal from their trafficker, their stage in the recovery process, and concerns that their community members might stigmatize them (Brennan, 2005). Given that Albania tends to be a collectivist, tight-knit, and patriarchal society, my “insider” status of being Albanian (see Merton, 1972) might have propelled victims into believing that I would judge them or that I would share their stories with other potential known members of the community. Social workers also pointed out that most victims had lost faith in others, particularly after being stigmatized by several members of the Albanian society (e.g., neighbors, family members, policemen, medical doctors, landlords, employers etc.)

²I have complemented the findings from interviewing practitioners with juridical cases in the literature.

following their return to Albania first-hand. Second, professionals were aware of the victims' challenges throughout all the return and reintegration phases: from the moment the victims sought help in the destination countries, to the moment they left the organizations and began an independent life. Third, interviewing experts proved to be an effective means of quickly obtaining results (also see Bogner et al., 2009). Service providers had observed many cases across several years, had shared information among themselves, and could draw parallelisms and differences. They could thus provide reflections and multifaceted analytical lenses that individual victims might not provide.

Ethics

Prior to starting the fieldwork, ethical approval was obtained from the Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge and the Albanian State Social Services. To ensure that participation was voluntary, all participants were given information sheets and consent forms in Albanian before being interviewed. These documents outlined the purpose of the research, explained the participants' right to withdraw from the study at any time, and offered explanations of how their personal data would be used. If interviewees had further questions, they were provided with verbal clarification. Only IDs were used when quoting the professionals, to protect their confidentiality and anonymity.

Data Analysis

The final data analysis followed the principles of inductive thematic analysis techniques and was carried out in three main steps (see Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, the transcripts were read several times to get a sense of the whole. Second, transcript texts were divided into codes that signified a single issue or idea (Grbich, 1998). Third, codes were compared and contrasted against each other and similar codes were placed into themes (Rapley, 2011). As noted by Van Nes et al. (2010), researchers should stay as much as possible in the original language during the data analysis process to avoid loss of meaning. Hence, both transcription and subsequent thematic analysis were carried out in Albanian. Unless otherwise specified, the challenges discussed throughout the following sections are experienced by both victims trafficked for sexual purposes and forced begging.

Results

Returning Home

Statistical data on returned Albanian trafficking victims are not available. Evidence from the interviews revealed that most assisted returned victims were females who had been trafficked for sexual purposes (either through forced prostitution or sham marriages) and children who had been trafficked for forced begging. Destination countries where victims returned from included neighboring countries (e.g., Greece, Italy, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia) and Western European countries (e.g., Germany, France, the UK, the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland).

Interviewees reported that the length of the exploitation period varied from six months to seven years. Victims were mainly identified through investigations from the police of the destination countries. Cases where victims sought active help were rare. In these cases, the help was sought from clients, passersby, or social media. The interviewees generally posited that victims trafficked outside Albania faced more difficulties in seeking help, mainly because these victims were unfamiliar with the language, culture, and institutions of the destination countries. This section examines the Albanian victims' decision to return to their origin country following identification as well as their initial experiences and challenges after the return.

The Destination versus the Origin Country

Voluntariness in Returning. Consistent with what Gallagher (2010) claims, the interviews confirmed the notion that Article 8.2 of the Palermo Protocol, which demands signatory parties to return identified trafficking victims “preferably voluntarily”, has little significance in practical terms. As one practitioner posits: “From a de jure aspect, the victims’ return is supposed to be voluntary. However, most of them usually return to Albania immediately following identification” (PSY4). Eleven out of fifteen interviewees claimed that victims do not wish to return to Albania following identification in destination countries: “Based on what the victims tell us, they return because foreign countries force them to. The majority want to start a new life there” (LAW1). Most practitioners indicated that forced return had negative consequences on the victims’ psycho-emotional wellbeing: “Returning back to Albania ... this transition process ... is very traumatic for the victims. The unwillingness of such return makes them particularly prone to stress and anxiety” (SW1).

The reasons that prevented victims from wanting to return were mainly tied to their life in Albania before trafficking: “Simply the thought of returning back to Albania is fearful for the victims because they know they will be returned to the same adverse conditions that propelled them into trafficking in the first place” (SW4). Similar to what the literature suggests (e.g. Aronowitz, 2015; Surtees, 2008), all the interviewees claimed that victims had been in a vulnerable position before falling prey to trafficking. They came from dysfunctional families and had suffered from severe socio-economic problems prior to leaving Albania. Thus, contrary to the linear narrative (Segrave et al., 2009), most victims considered Albania to be an unsafe environment, despite it being their country of origin. As one social worker notes: “A colleague in England has told me that Albanian victims refuse to collaborate during the return process. They say: ‘in Albania my father raped me, my brother beat me ... I don’t want to go back, I am better off here’” (SW2). Such remarks raise doubts as to whether destination countries follow Article 8.1 of the Palermo Protocol to ensure the victims’ safety before deciding to return them.

Is Return the Best Option?. The professionals had contrasting views with regards to where the reintegration process would be more successful for the victims – in the destination or in the origin country. Seven interviewees believed that reintegration in the destination country was more beneficial for the victims, mainly because of the limited economic opportunities that Albania has to offer. As PSY2 reports: “They want financial stability at the end of the day, which is logically more likely to be attained in developed countries”. In addition, some professionals suggested that being in a foreign country would also protect victims from the stigma they would face in Albania: “Victims that can start the reintegration process in destination countries have a higher success rate. Since no one knows them, they face less discrimination” (SW3). Interviewees also highlighted the fact that victims would be legally safer in destination countries given that “Western countries invest more in the security of their citizens” (LAW1).

However, six interviewees argued that the benefits of reintegrating in destination countries came with the cost of social ostracism. “No matter what another country can offer to these victims, their self-image – which has been severely destroyed – can never be re-built unless they have a sense of identity, a sense of belonging, and a social support system” (SW2). Moreover, some interviewees suggested that returning to Albania would also allow trafficking victims to heal by confronting their traumas: “Coming back and facing early traumas would give victims the strength to move forward. They need to reconcile feelings of guilt, shame, and anger, which began to develop before they left Albania” (PSY3). Previous research has primarily focused on the disadvantages of returning victims back to their home countries, including the chance that they will face a lack of acceptance from the community (Ruhi, 2003), a lack of economic opportunities (Ray, 2006), and a lack of family support (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2013). The socio-cultural and psycho-emotional advantages of reintegrating trafficking victims in their origin countries have been largely disregarded.

Accepting the Victim Status

Following return, whether this being voluntary or involuntary, victims' first challenge related to issues regarding self-image and self-identity. A consistent finding that emerged from the interviews was victims' reluctance to acknowledge their exploitation. Human beings' motivation to avoid unpleasant thoughts or feelings is a widely acknowledged phenomenon (Hayes et al., 1996). Given the traffickers' use of threats, violence, and manipulation, victims had developed denial-like defense mechanisms as a means of reducing the pain of physical and psychological abuse: "All trafficking victims experience emotional numbness at the beginning. They normalize or deny the abuse they have experienced. They have built these protective walls, which help them foster self-preservation" (PSY3). The victims' hesitation to admit their abuse might be caused by several reasons, including loyalty to the trafficker, fear of retaliation, shame of being exploited, or a need to distance themselves from their past (Aronowitz, 2009; Clawson & Dutch, 2008; Warren, 2012). Refusing to be labeled a victim can also be perceived as an empowering act – it gives the sense of control back to formerly abused individuals and allows them to have agency over their perceptions of self and their past experiences. Victim labels may connote the image of someone being passively abused and in some cases can actively create stigma and shame (Williamson & Serna, 2018). Nevertheless, findings from this study suggest that denying the trafficking experience had negative implications for the victims, both on a legal and psychological level.

Victims are returned to Albania by the destination countries' relevant authorities. Due to matters related to human trafficking investigations, victim identification needs to be further confirmed by the Albanian border police:

The first state representatives the victim faces upon arriving in Albania are the anti-trafficking policemen – either at the airport or at the coastal border. They are aware of the occurrence of trafficking and their job is to receive the victim's police statement (LAW2).

Nevertheless, most victims gave false testimonies during the interrogation by the Albanian border policemen: "Many victims provide false confessions and claim that they have not been trafficked or exploited. They also refuse to name the individuals who have accompanied them outside the country" (LAW2). There might be several reasons behind the victims' reluctance to truthfully confess to Albanian police. While practitioners mentioned the psychological resistances to the traumatic past, threats from the trafficker, or fear of retaliation, another factor that might have pushed victims into falsely confessing might be related to a lack of trust toward Albanian authorities, due to the latter's potential stigmatizing comments or involvement in corruptive affairs. The U.S. Department of State (2020) points to instances of Albanian government employees complicit in trafficking cases. Moreover, Friesendorf (2009) enlists several cases of corrupt Albanian officials involved in trafficking. For example, in 2006, five state officers were arrested for various crimes relating to their involvement in trafficking, while in 2007, 12 police officers were charged with involvement in trafficking. In the Belgian Federal Prosecution Service's Albanian case LG, one of the defendants was an officer in President Berisha's republican guard and a former agent of Albanian security services.

False testimonies are however considered a violation of Albanian criminal laws. Article 305/b of the Albanian Criminal Code (2017) states that giving false information to police officers during an interrogation is a criminal act punishable by imprisonment up to six months. Article 307 further provides that refusing to answer questions concerning knowledge of a criminal offense or its perpetrators constitutes a criminal contravention and is punishable by up to one year of imprisonment. Even though the EC (2004) suggests that trafficking victims have the right to protection despite their willingness to testify and that their penalization should be avoided at any cost, evidence from the current study shows that Albanian victims were prosecuted for their reluctance to cooperate with authorities: "We have had many cases where victims have been unfortunately convicted for having given false testimonies or for refusing to provide information about the traffickers" (LAW2). The prosecution of trafficking victims in their origin country due to the provision of false testimonies is

a rather innovative finding. Studies on the criminalization of victims of human trafficking have been mainly focused on illegal entry (Goodey, 2003), possession of false documentation (Hales & Gelsthorpe, 2012), prosecution under prostitution-related charges (Gonzalez, 2002), and offenses related to criminal acts committed under force (Malloch, 2016).

The victims' resistance to accepting their abuse impacted them on a legal, as well as on a psychological level. Data from the interviews suggests that refusing to confront the past pushed both victims trafficked for sexual purposes and forced begging into withdrawal. Behavior regulation strategies that involve thought and emotion suppression, avoidance, and denial-like mechanisms are however counterproductive in emotional management (Gross, 1998; Wenzlaff & Wegner, 2000). Moreover, such mechanisms negatively impacted the outcome of therapy:

Acknowledging their traumatic experiences and the fact that their emotional world has been shattered, to me, is the first big step towards recovery. Otherwise, therapy is ineffective. It is like 'tilting at windmills'³ - you cannot help someone who doesn't believe they have a problem (PSY3).

For sex trafficking victims, refusing to accept their past was also problematic in the light of examinations for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs): "When sex trafficking victims enter our organization, as a general practice, they need to undergo certain tests to determine whether they have caught STDs. However, some victims deny their sexual exploitation, thus making the medical examinations sometimes impossible" (MD). In the opinion of the professionals, overcoming emotional protective walls is a lengthy process, which requires the victims' readiness to collaborate and progress.

Victims' Rehabilitation

After having established trust in their relationships with the staff, victims would finally start to share their story and detailed experiences at the fourth or fifth psycho-social therapeutic session (SW5). At this point, the practitioners noticed the scars that trafficking had left on the victims' mental health: "You are in front of a person who has lost faith in others, who has lost the will to live, who has lost self-respect. Before reintegrating back into society, victims should first recover from their traumas" (SW2). While the literature refers mainly to return and reintegration as distinct phases following victims' post-trafficking experiences, more than half of the interviewees claimed that there was another stage between the two: rehabilitation. "The first phase following the return is actually the rehabilitation one. Reintegration takes place afterward" (PSY4). The rehabilitation process was carried out within the shelter. Its main aim was to strengthen the victims' psycho-emotional and physical state. Rehabilitation is what Surtees et al. (2016) would refer to as "reintegration on an individual and personal level" (p. 30).

All participants claimed that victims suffered from a host of health complications, with most of these complications being a direct consequence of trafficking. Practitioners indicated that the victims' post-trafficking psychological problems included emotional turmoil, mood fluctuations, depression, troubles sleeping, fear, and anxiety. In addition to the psychological consequences of exploitation, sex trafficking victims also suffered from infectious diseases: "We have had cases of sex trafficking victims diagnosed with syphilis, hepatitis B, and C. They face many difficulties in accepting the diagnosis . . . some do not even want to know the outcome of the clinical examinations" (MD). Additional individual challenges were related to shame, low self-esteem, and a lack of resilience: "Many victims de-value themselves, they think they are unworthy, and perceive every challenge as a personal handicap. They often say: 'These things happen to me because I am incapable, I am nothing, I deserve to suffer'" (PSY2). These results echo previous research on physical and mental health conditions of trafficking victims (e.g., Goldenberg, 2015; Kiss et al., 2015; Oram et al., 2012).

³Tilting at windmills' is an idiom which means 'attacking imaginary enemies', originating from Miguel de Cervantes' novel Don Quixote. In the present context, the psychologist used this idiom to portray the inefficient efforts of treating traumas, which most victims denied having experienced.

While low self-esteem has been identified as one of the main consequences of exploitation (Adam, 1978; Derks, 1998), the interviews revealed that low levels of confidence had been established since the victims' early childhood. Most victims had experienced physical, emotional, psychological, and/or sexual violence by their parents or relatives while growing up in Albania. As one social worker notes: "I remember one victim telling me: 'I have never heard a single positive or encouraging word from my parents. They only told me – shut up, you can't move, you can't go out, you can't go to school'" (SW2). Research has shown that early exposure to violence interferes with neurological and emotional development and is associated with further victimization (Moffitt, 2013; Till-tentschert, 2017). These findings were also supported by all the psychologists interviewed in the present study, who argued that victims' dysfunctional thought patterns – which were wired at an early age – were partially responsible for their continued victimization: "Early internalized false beliefs about the self are often unmalleable and deeply ingrained in their brains . . . these thoughts tend to pull victims back to exploitative situations. They continue to feel victimized and are often re-trafficked" (PSY2).

Rehabilitation is commonly defined as restoration to a former state (Pandey et al., 2013). However, in the present case, the former state was undesirable. Hence, similar to what Zimmerman (2007) argues, most interviewees indicated that starting a new life was a long journey for the victims. This journey was particularly challenging for children trafficked for forced begging, since they had suffered from severe neglect: "Since these children grew up on the streets, they lack basic life skills. We first have to teach them how to eat healthily, how to use cutlery, how to take a shower, how to dress, how to behave" (PSY5). Due to the victims' numerous individual needs, practitioners claimed that the amount of time victims spent inside a shelter was insufficient: "One cannot recover from all the traumas in their life in solely six months or one year of assistance. Completing the first phase of the program does not lead to immediate empowerment for the victims" (SW4). While rehabilitation was deemed time-consuming, more than half of interviewees claimed that victims tend to develop institutional dependency if subjected to continuous protection: "If victims stay for lengthy periods of time inside a shelter, they become dependent on staff members. Such dependency can be harmful for the victims as it negatively impacts their capacity for self-sufficiency" (SW5). This remark is in line with Bearup's (2016) observation that assisted protection can often lead to a minimization of trafficking victims' agency. As such, the community and informal networks have a pressing role during the reintegration stage, following the victims' release from the shelters.

Challenges to Reintegration I: Socio-economic Factors

These victims feel so empty that solely the assistance offered by organizations is insufficient to fill the void in their hearts. It takes a lot of work not only from NGO staff, but also from the family, from the community, from the state . . . everyone must come together to heal the scars that trafficking has left in these victims' lives (PSY5).

As also observed by Bearup (2016), a common view among interviewees was that reintegration should not be undertaken solely by NGOs and that the formalized assistance offered by trafficking organizations cannot replace the role of social processes in the attainment of reintegration. All professionals interviewed in this study claimed that the reintegration process began when victims left the shelter and started to live an independent life in the community. Such sentiment is also in agreement with Derks's (1998) definition of reintegration as "a renewed reunion or incorporation within a social unity" (p. 13). Data from the interviews suggest that the greatest difficulties for trafficking victims were encountered during the reintegration phase.

For victims trafficked internationally for numerous years, reintegrating back in the Albanian society was particularly challenging. Undergoing a re-update and a re-adjustment with the Albanian social, cultural, economic, and institutional context took a lot of their psycho-emotional energy. Such additional challenges further influenced the length and quality of their reintegration. Moreover, after leaving the shelter, victims had to face the same socio-economic challenges that pushed them into trafficking in the first instance. In accordance with previous research (e.g., Le, 2017; Lisborg &

Plambech, 2009), most interviewees suggested that reintegration challenges were tied to the victims' life before trafficking, which was mainly characterized by poor economic conditions and parental negligence. This section examines the victims' challenges in reentering the familial and communal environment as well as in leading a financially independent life.

Family

Family has always been a strong social structure in Albania. This was particularly evident following the collapse of communism in the 1990s. Due to high unemployment, widespread poverty, and weak state structures, family became the main and often the only source of security (Nixon, 2009). Familial ties are commonly used to establish reputation and trust, secure jobs, navigate through bureaucracy, and access justice or political power. The importance of family support in attaining a successful reintegration following the victims' release from shelters was emphasized at least three times in every interview: "Family is really important, and I will bring it up in every sentence that includes the word 'reintegration'" (PSY3). All interviewees noted that supportive families were key in most successful cases of reintegration. A common view among practitioners was that apart from being a psycho-emotional support system, families can also help victims strengthen economically by accommodating them, raising their children, or meeting their financial needs until they found a stable job. Nevertheless, reunification with the family was often prevented by early conflictual relationships that had begun before victims were trafficked and/or by the family's reluctance to accept the victims once returned.

Twelve out of 15 practitioners claimed that most families rejected trafficking victims following their return to Albania. Such rejection was mainly prevalent among the families of victims trafficked for sexual purposes:

In ten years of experience working directly with sex trafficking victims, I can say that exclusion from the family is the standard. Parents often say things like: "To me she is dead, I do not care whether she lives or not" (PSY2).

Traditional Albanian families have a patriarchal structure and are characterized by a commitment to "shame and honor" as regulators of interpersonal relationships. Cultural norms promoted by the Kanun of Lek Dukagjini⁴ posit that the prevention of collective shame is an important issue for Albanian families (Amnesty International, 2006; Arsovska, 2015). While "honor" is a quality associated with men, "shame" is a female attribute. The source of familial shame is commonly tied to women's sexual behavior and their unwillingness to submit to patriarchal power (Danermark et al., 1989). Kanun customary laws place great importance on the submissive role of women in the Albanian society, as well as on the masculinity of men (Arsovska, 2006a). Kanun stipulates that a woman is a sack made to endure and that her husband has the right to publicly humiliate – or even kill – her in case of disobedience (Arsovska & Craig, 2006b). Interviews with practitioners revealed that the protection of family honor in the eyes of the community was one of the main reasons for parents' rejection of their daughter: "Parents often claim that reconciliation with their daughter is met by rejection from relatives and neighbors. So, most parents choose to reject their daughter instead" (SW3).

Although all interviewees stressed the importance of family reunification, they also agreed that returning to the familial environment prevented the achievement of a successful reintegration in some cases, particularly when family members were involved in the trafficking ring. Such phenomenon was more prevalent among Romani and Egyptian children, whose parents had subjected them to forced begging in neighboring countries. Members of these two social groups are highly marginalized in Albania: they face discrimination, high levels of illiteracy, unemployment, and poor housing conditions, with many being homeless or living in self-made shelters (De Soto et al., 2005). Romani and Egyptian parents tend to resort to child trafficking when they have no other means of survival (Delap, 2009;

⁴The Kanun of Lek Dukagjini codifies the rules on which traditional Albanian culture is based, primarily focusing on the concepts of honor, shame, and hospitality (Arsovska, 2015). The original Kanun includes specific clarifications concerning the accepted manner of retaliatory killings, for restoring honor to the offended when the laws are disobeyed. Today, for ordinary Albanians, the Kanun statement "blood must be taken" still has great significance (Arsovska, 2015, p. 170).

Gjermeni et al., 2008b; Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2003). Interviewees claimed that when children reached the age of 18 and had to leave the shelter, reintegrating alongside their families was not a vital option. Since their families' adverse economic conditions remained the same, the probability of re-trafficking was high: "If all the victim's family members continue to rely on begging to make a living, it is very likely that the child will re-start begging as well . . . this does not leave much room for a healthy reintegration" (SW6). Apart from poor economic conditions, reintegrating within the familial environment was disadvantageous for these children due to parental neglect: "There have been instances when children as young as ten years old have gone home for one or two days and when they have returned in the shelter, we have noticed that they had consumed alcohol, drugs, or cigarettes" (PSY5). Academic research on forced child begging within Romani and Egyptian families in Eastern Europe is lacking. Preliminary findings from the current study raise concerns about the consequences of such phenomenon and warrant further investigation.

Social stigma

Social stigma is defined as "the negative regard, inferior status, and relative powerlessness that society collectively accords to people who possess a particular characteristic or belong to a particular group or category" (Herek, 2009, p. 441). According to Goffman (1963), stigma is a process by which the rejection and reaction of others spoils normal identity. Thirteen practitioners stated that trafficking victims were stigmatized in all the areas of their lives: "Stigma is everywhere: at school, at work, at professional training courses . . . the moment people find out about the victims' past, they become judgmental" (SW3). Such prejudice was more prevalent among victims who had been sexually exploited: "people judge them because they think that sex trafficking is equal to willful prostitution" (SW4). The conflation of sex trafficking with the exercise of voluntary prostitution is not unfounded and has been previously empirically investigated (Agustín, 2005; Butcher, 2003). What has received little attention is the impact that such generalizations can have on returned sex trafficking victims, particularly in patriarchal societies like Albania, where women's sexuality is suppressed and condemned.

Most interviewees stated that their organizations took all the appropriate measures not to reveal the victims' pasts. The victims themselves were additionally vigilant about sharing their story with others: "Victims are always conscious about their surroundings and try very hard not to share their trafficking experience" (SW1). Even though concealing one's stigmatized status can offer protection from discrimination, research has demonstrated that stigma concealment is stressful since it produces cognitive burden resulting from fear of discovery (Frost, 2011). Despite efforts taken to preserve the victims' anonymity, 10 interviewees claimed that trafficking victims' stories were frequently disclosed mainly because of the high level of social cohesion in Albania, which allows for the information to spread quickly. While stigmatization from neighbors, colleagues, or friends at school impacted the reintegration process only on a psycho-social level, discrimination by individuals in a position of power had detrimental consequences on victims' security and economic well-being.

Six practitioners claimed that sex trafficking victims faced rejection in the job market due to discrimination: "In many cases, employers have refused to recruit victims after finding out about their sex trafficking experiences" (PSY4). Furthermore, five interviewees pointed out that discrimination against victims was also pronounced among law-enforcement agents, who instead of offering victims protection, exacerbated the prejudicial treatment: "Even in my presence, policemen have said denigrating things about sex trafficking victims, such as: 'Look at what she's wearing, doesn't she look like a prostitute? She obviously chose to engage in that profession herself'" (LAW1). Some practitioners suggested that stigmatization was additionally perpetuated by property owners, who often refused to rent out apartments to female sex trafficking victims belonging to ethnic minorities:

When the apartment's owner discovered that our beneficiary was Romani, he called me and said: 'Come and get this woman out of my apartment. I didn't know she was a "jevg"⁵. The victim is now still living in our shelter (SW5).

⁵"Jevg" is a pejorative term in Albanian, used against members of Roma and Egyptian communities.

Interestingly, stigmatization against Romani and Egyptian children who had been trafficked for forced begging was not directed toward their ethnicity or trafficking experience. In such cases, social stigma was rather a result of children not meeting the criteria for an ‘ideal victim’⁶: “Since these children have lived all their lives in the streets, they often use vulgar language, are loud, and engage in inappropriate behavior. Such conduct is often met by condemnation and rejection from the community” (PSY5).

Thus, even though Albanian trafficking victims might have the will to build a new life and cut ties with the past, their reintegration is precluded by the wider social context they are embedded in. From a critical victimological perspective (see Spencer & Walklate, 2016), Albanian society can be understood as partially responsible for trafficking victims’ continued victimization.

Economic Challenges

All practitioners claimed that economic difficulties were the biggest challenge experienced by Albanian trafficking victims following their release from the shelter: “If your stomach is empty, post-trauma is the last thing you worry about – you first need to survive” (PSY3). Securing employment was impeded by Albania’s adverse economic situation and scarce job opportunities as much as by the victims’ lack of professional qualifications. The interviewees maintained that most victims had interrupted education before entering high school and lacked a professional background. Research has shown that job skills are important for a trafficking victim to secure financial independence (Macy & Johns, 2011). To prepare victims for the job market, all four organizations offered professional training courses as part of the reintegration services. Vocational training helped victims develop skills in cooking, tailoring, babysitting, hairdressing, or coffee machine repairing. Nevertheless, the income generated in these sectors is equal to Albania’s minimum wage, which, as argued by most interviewees, is insufficient to cover basic living costs without external support. Ergo, the economic situation for trafficking victims not accommodated or financially supported by their families after leaving the shelter was particularly challenging. Five practitioners stated that internationally trafficked victims experienced the poverty in Albania more negatively than internally trafficked victims. Victims in the former category had been exposed to a higher standard of living and could discern the wage disparity between Albania and more developed destination countries: “It is the stress of realizing that your life is miserable. When you are aware that you live in misery . . . that is when you start feeling desperate. Victims trafficked internally don’t know better – for them €200 per month is enough” (PSY2).

Besides limited financial resources and pragmatic obstacles, long-term reintegration was negatively influenced by a lack of economic sustainability and exploitative working conditions. Most practitioners stipulated that for trafficking victims, building a healthy lifestyle was highly associated with financial steadiness. Nevertheless, employment was often unstable due to factors related to the employers’ unwillingness to support victims’ professional development or to the sporadic nature of the private businesses in which victims would find employment. According to the interviewees, trafficking victims were mainly employed as manual workers in sweatshops with poor working conditions: “Victims work unreasonable hours for a low wage and often have no rights to paid holidays. In some cases, victims were fired because they had to skip a day from work due to illness” (SW2). Such adverse working conditions coupled with the victims’ trauma and existent low self-esteem further discouraged and demotivated them. Therefore, the victims’ experiences in the Albanian job market can be considered as a form of secondary victimization (see Wollhuter et al., 2008).

Eleven interviewees claimed that economic empowerment is the main precursor to a successful reintegration. In line with previous research (e.g., Jobe, 2010; Ray, 2006), most professionals stated that escaping miserable economic conditions was the primary reason for re-trafficking: “Accommodation and employment are crucial. If victims don’t have enough financial resources, if they don’t have a place where to sleep, in a short time they will re-fall prey to traffickers” (SW7). As a final remark, while previous research suggests that trafficking victims’ economic rehabilitation is associated with psychological well-being (Macy & Johns, 2011), evidence from the present study shows that victims began to

⁶According to this notion, victims should always be pure, innocent, and helpless (see Aronowitz, 2015; Christie, 1986).

suffer psychologically precisely when their financial needs were met: “Post-trauma is revealed when economic stability is attained. After survival needs have been addressed, victims start to feel uncomfortable with themselves and begin to reflect on what they have lost and on how trafficking has transformed their lives” (PSY2).

Challenges to Reintegration II: Legal and Institutional Barriers

Security and Legal Proceedings

As argued by Surtees (2008), victims’ sense of safety is highly related to their reintegration. A recurrent theme in the interviews was the risk of reprisals from the victims’ traffickers: “In my opinion, safety and security issues are among the main problems during the entire reintegration process. Even when the trafficker is imprisoned, threats do not seem to stop” (SW3). Trafficking victims were protected by special security forces while living in the organizations’ shelters. Hence, in those cases, threats were mainly directed toward professionals or the victim’s family members. The reasons behind the lack of measures taken against the traffickers were tied both to the complexity of trafficking cases and to Albania’s weak judicial system.

Lawsuits against the trafficker were initiated either in destination countries (and then transferred to Albania) or directly in Albania following the victims’ return. According to the interviewees, the former case proved to be a lengthier and more challenging process:

The files need to be translated and transferred, communication letters from foreign and local institutions first need to go through the Ministry of Justice before reaching Albanian courts . . . given Albania’s lack of institutional infrastructure . . . that takes a lot of time (LAW1).

However, even when the case was initiated in Albania, legal proceedings were unnecessarily long:

Every step of the judicial process – from the moment the victim denounces the trafficker to the police, to when the case is sent to the prosecutor, and until it reaches the court – can be dragged on for months or years (LAW2).

Some interviewees claimed that in addition to the obstacles involved in investigating trafficking cases, legal proceedings were also prolonged because of the Albanian policemen’s and prosecutors’ negligence (e.g., LAW1, LAW2, SW3, SW4). Most practitioners stated that delayed trials negatively impacted the victims’ reintegration, both from a security and a psychological perspective. Psychologically, attaining justice was paramount to the victims from a retributive point of view (see Fletcher, 1999): “The trafficker’s conviction is really important to the victims. If the trafficker is imprisoned, victims can put their mind at rest: ‘Yes, I was exploited, but the perpetrator is suffering for what he did to me’” (LAW2).

Achieving justice was impeded by judicial delays as much as by accelerated criminal procedures. Article 334.1 of the Albanian Criminal Procedure Code (2017) states that every defendant has the right to request an abbreviated trial, which allows for the case to be resolved under the existing state of evidence. In addition, Article 406 stipulates that if a defendant has demanded an abbreviated trial and a conviction decision is issued, the court shall reduce the sentence by one third. A concern expressed by both lawyers interviewed in this study was the controversial application of these two articles in most trafficking cases:

Let’s assume that the trafficker is sentenced to seven years – one-third is lowered before he enters prison and a couple of years are reduced due to good behaviour in prison – he ends up getting out of prison in no time (LAW1).

Another issue raised by three interviewees was the victims’ lack of notification following traffickers’ furloughs⁷, thus not allowing the former to take appropriate protective measures (SW3). Several practitioners suggested that the lenient measures taken against the trafficker were also an outcome of corruption:

⁷A prison furlough is the release of prisoners on a temporary license. Prisoners are allowed to leave the prison for a short period of time and then return.

You know how things work in Albania . . . the trafficker can ‘buy’ the policeman/prosecutor/judge . . . Although I don’t have concrete evidence regarding this transaction, corruption can be implied by the low sentence length demanded by the prosecutor or the early groundless release of the trafficker (LAW2).

Even though the involvement of Albanian members of the judiciary in corruptive affairs cannot be proven, according to the EC Progress Report (2015), corruption in the Albanian justice system is very widespread. The report further notes that Albanian judges and prosecutors are not held sufficiently accountable for their actions.

Other difficulties experienced by trafficking victims related to the stress of being a witness in criminal cases and to compensation claims in civil cases. Most interviewees stated that testifying either in court or at the prosecutor’s office was very challenging for the victims:

I have accompanied victims myself and I can say that the process of providing testimonies mirrors their trafficking experience. After testifying, they are often tearful, fearful, frustrated, and traumatized. The intensity of questioning is just too much for the victims (LAW2).

The victims’ psychological state was further aggravated by confronting their trafficker in the court room. Article 361.7 of the Albanian Criminal Procedure Code (2017) provides that witnesses of grave crimes can be questioned at a distance using audio-visual equipment. Nevertheless, evidence from the interviews indicates that such practice was not employed in trafficking cases, thus putting victims’ well-being in jeopardy: “In practice, video-conference rooms don’t work. Victims have often provided court testimonies in front of traffickers, while facing numerous threats and insults by them” (SW3). The last challenge faced by Albanian returned trafficking victims during judicial proceedings is related to the right of compensation for the harm done to them. According to the EC (2004), compensation is one of the essential steps for the socio-economic reintegration of trafficking victims. However, most interviewees claimed that the enforcement of compensation claims is problematic: “Traffickers usually transfer their assets to their friends and relatives. Consequently, the execution of the victim’s compensation is rendered impossible” (LAW1).

Assistance and State Social Services

A concern expressed by almost all interviewees working for NGOs was the lack of stability in service provision due to limited funding: “The services provided by our NGO depend on donor funding, which isn’t always consistent . . . Sometimes we feel guilty for not being able to pay the victims’ rent . . . We haven’t abandoned them; we just truly don’t have enough financial capacities” (SW2). Other challenges within the organizational context related to staff members. Several interviewees highlighted the need for an increase in human resources as well as the lack of psychosocial support for practitioners providing direct services to trafficking victims:

We carry the weight of the victims’ traumatic stories with us all the time and don’t have a place where to vent. I want to consult a psychologist, but I can’t afford it and our organisation cannot pay for it (PSY1).

High levels of stress and burnout among NGO staff members are common. Research has demonstrated that professionals assisting victims are prone to experiencing secondary traumatic stress or compassion fatigue (Jenkins & Baird, 2002; Figley, 2013). Beyond ethical reasons, supporting service providers is significant since a healthy staff is better equipped to assist victims in attaining a successful reintegration (Surtees, 2008).

As far as state social services are concerned, most practitioners were unsatisfied with the support provided by the Albanian government to trafficking victims: “NGOs cannot provide endless long-term assistance. The Albanian state should play a primary role – organizations should be considered as a form of additional support” (SW5). Some practitioners stated that since 2014–2015, the Albanian government had taken two positive steps in assisting anti-trafficking NGOs: 1) covering the financial expenses of the sheltered trafficking victims’ food, and 2) paying the salaries of NGO staff. Nevertheless, as one interviewee notes: “This is not enough . . . this amount only makes up for 30%

of the expenses of our organization” (SW4). Additionally, the Albanian State Social Services provides an economic assistance of 3,000 Albanian Lek⁸ per month to all unemployed trafficking victims following their release from the shelter (Ligji, 9355-2016). All professionals considered this amount insufficient for living a dignified life.

Another service not addressed by the Albanian government is related to medical costs. Similar to every Albanian citizen, trafficking victims had the right to be issued a health card, which covers the expenses of basic medical services, such as blood tests or doctors’ visits. As previously stated, victims suffered from a host of health complications following their trafficking experience, most of which required medical treatment. Nevertheless, five interviewees suggested that the costs of such medication were not covered by the health card: “The Albanian government needs to invest on drug funds, particularly for vulnerable individuals such as trafficking victims. Medicaments are expensive, while victims’ salaries are quite low . . . this situation causes discontent among victims” (MD). In addition to a lack of medications, trafficking victims were also faced with scarce psychological assistance after leaving the shelter. Even though most organizations continued the provision of counseling services after victims had been reintegrated in the community, such services were not offered by the Albanian state. Psychotherapy sessions following the victims’ exit from the shelter were infrequent. For example, one interviewee claimed that the staff of her organization would meet with the victims once in every six months after they started to live independently (SW5).

Bureaucracy and Collaboration with State Agencies

Albania’s laws look aesthetically pleasing written down, but the truth is that the system doesn’t work. You are constantly referred from one institution to the other and no one seems to be responsible about anything. Now think about trafficking victims being faced with this weak bureaucratic system. Victims get intimidated by assertive bureaucrats questioning their applications and are reluctant to ask for clarifications. Endlessly chasing that minimal assistance that rightfully belongs to them kills their motivation, their will to move forward . . . it’s very sad (PSY2).

The post-communist transition has been characterized by low levels of capacity and functionality for the Albanian state (Cepiku & Mititelu, 2010). Governing institutions suffer from a lack of efficiency and responsibility as well as a “chronic inability to provide even the most basic public goods and services” (Ruli, 2003, p. 151). Economic stability was the first aspect of trafficking victims’ reintegration negatively impacted by Albania’s poor bureaucratic performance. The interviews revealed that unemployed trafficking victims had the right to register as job seekers at the Albanian National Employment Service, a government agency responsible for assisting Albanian citizens seeking employment. Nevertheless, 10 professionals claimed that accessing such service was a time-consuming and demotivating process for trafficking victims: “Victims need to wait three months until their documents are processed and then normally another five months until they find a job. This gap causes financial instability, destroys their spirit, and makes them depressed” (SW1).

According to the law on social housing (Ligji nr, 22-2018), Albanian trafficking victims are among the prioritized categories of vulnerable individuals in the application for government rent subsidy following their stay in a shelter. However, more than half of the practitioners argued that applying for affordable housing schemes was a tedious process, requiring numerous documents that victims were unable to secure due to their vulnerability and to matters that went beyond their control: “One of the required documents is a notarized rental contract. However, most landlords don’t provide this contract . . . the real estate system in Albania tends to be informal” (SW3). The difficulties experienced by trafficking victims in gaining social housing endured even after submitting the application: “The waiting list is too long. Victims have to wait for years, without any guarantee that their application will

⁸3,000 Albanian Lek is equal to approximately 28 USD.

be successful. It largely depends on the will of the Mayor” (SW7). Institutional barriers were also evident in the collaboration of anti-trafficking organizations with state agencies:

We face challenges in sending requests and receiving responses from public institutions. Public officials should normally respond within ten working days, but that is not always the case. A delayed response also precludes us from giving the right legal assistance (LAW1).

The hurdles imposed upon trafficking victims by the Albanian state not only hindered the reintegration process, but they also increased the probability of victims being re-trafficked: “Various problems exist on a systemic and structural level. If victims don’t receive the required support from the state after leaving our shelter, they can regress and return to the same vulnerable position before trafficking” (SW1). Reflecting on the scarcity of state social services and nonfunctional bureaucracies under the theoretical umbrella of critical victimology, the Albanian state can be perceived as a harmful agent in the victims’ reintegration process (see Spencer & Walklate, 2016). Data from the interviews imply that the weakness of the Albanian state and its failure in providing adequate reintegration assistance had a conducive role “in the continued production of victims” (Mawby & Walklate, 1994, p. 14). Consequently, the Albanian state can be considered directly responsible for the victims’ re-victimization and re-trafficking experiences following their release from organizations’ shelter.

Conclusions

This article examined the individual and structural challenges of Albanian returned victims of sex trafficking and forced begging. Contrary to the linear trajectory, which portrays the origin country as a safe place (Segrave et al., 2009), returning to Albania was an undesirable outcome for most victims. Findings from the current study suggest that victims undergo two main phases following their return: rehabilitation and reintegration. The rehabilitation phase is aimed at strengthening the victims’ psycho-emotional state within a shelter, while the reintegration process refers to the victims’ independent life within the community. The time that victims should spend in a shelter is subject to debate. On the one hand, interviewees argued that recovering from trauma is a lengthy process. On the other hand, they agreed that being subject to continuous protection created institutional dependency and negatively impacted their capacity for self-sufficiency.

Both victims trafficked for sexual purposes and forced begging faced similar challenges following their return to Albania. They were reluctant to accept that they had been exploited, suffered from a host of health complications, and lacked the motivation to start over. On an economic and institutional level, their reintegration was impeded by a lack of financial stability, exploitative working conditions, difficulties in accessing justice, a lack of state social services, and a weak bureaucratic system. Social stigma and family rejection were however more prominent challenges among sex trafficking victims. Contrastingly, victims trafficked for forced begging were accepted by their families. Nevertheless, reuniting with the family was not a healthy solution for these victims due to parental neglect and the involvement of family members in the trafficking ring. Hence, the role of families during the reintegration process is polemic. On the one hand, family support was considered a crucial precursor to a successful reintegration. On the other hand, in cases where family members were involved in the trafficking process or where the familial environment was unhealthy, reuniting with the family was not a vital option.

Limitations

This study was an initial attempt to uncover some of the unresearched challenges experienced by Albanian trafficking victims during their return, rehabilitation, and reintegration in Albania. Due to time and resource constraints, the scope of this research did not allow for a detailed exploration of all victims’ challenges. Future studies should attempt to reach returned Albanian trafficking victims directly and to increase the scope of the target population by including victims trafficked for forced labor and forced criminality.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to my MPhil Supervisor, Dr. Paolo Campana, for his guidance and encouragement throughout all the stages of the research process. I would also like to extend my thanks to all the four entities that agreed to participate in my study: NGO Different and Equal (Alb: Të Ndryshëm dhe të Barabartë), NGO Vatra Psycho-Social Center (Alb: Qendra Psiko-Sociale Vatra), NGO Another Vision (Alb: Tjetër Vizion), and the National Reception Centre for Trafficking Victims (Alb: Qendra Kombëtare Pritëse e Viktimave të Trafikimit). This research would not have been possible without your collaboration. In addition, I am thankful to the three anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback, as well as to the editor for her support and encouragement.

ORCID

Klea Ramaj  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3998-5532>

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are in the form of Albanian transcripts and reside with the corresponding author, Klea Ramaj. The data are not publicly available since they contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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