



ALBANIA REPORT 2021





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INTRODUCTION

Hibiscus is the UK's leading organisation working with Black, minoritised and migrant women and families at the intersection of the immigration and Criminal Justice systems. Our work over 35 years has afforded us distinct experience and unrivalled understanding of the intersecting and compounding disadvantages, challenges, and vulnerabilities experienced by our clients.

The communities we work with face multiple barriers to justice such as racism, xenophobia, trafficking, gender-based violence and destitution, which place them at-risk of re-traumatisation and being re-exploited. Our person-centred approach empowers our clients in dealing with their multiple and often complex needs.

Our work spans across the community, prisons, courts, and within detention and international resettlement settings. Our work at the grassroots level encompasses three intervention methods:

- Our Practical Support workstream involves specialist casework and tailored support around housing, immigration, entitlements, and legal issues.
- Our Wellbeing workstream provides emotional, mental and psychosocial support, to enable clients to address the trauma they experienced.
- The new Empowerment & Agency workstream creates opportunities for clients to develop agency and empower themselves to change their lives and participate in opportunities to influence systemic change by using their voice and experience. This is supported by our Influencing department where we partner with the clients, to provide them the skills and expertise they need to develop as lived experience leaders. We create platforms where their voices can challenge inequalities and influence change.

Within the context of the Hibiscus International Resettlement Programme, Hibiscus' immediate priorities are to support livelihoods, social networks and employment opportunities to increase the likelihood of successful long-term resettlement. We strive to assist and support clients to successfully reintegrate in their home countries by extending our referral programme to local support organisations and networks to support resettlement needs, such as securing access to accommodation and seed capital assistance to start small businesses. Covid-19 has added an extra element of insecurity, therefore increasing the need for successful integration programmes.

Within the context of these aims, Marchu Girma (Chief Executive), Louise Hatch (Head of International Resettlement and Detention Services) and Izabela and Blodina (Project Workers) undertook a research field trip to Albania in September/October 2021.

BACKGROUND TO OUR TRIP

In recent years, Albanian nationals have been one of the top three nationalities supported by Hibiscus in Yarl's Wood and Heathrow Immigration Removal Centres. Since April 2019, we have worked with over 221 clients from Albania: our second highest client-base by nationality. Between 2021-2022, we supported 99 Albanian clients, more than any other nationality during this period.

The objectives of the field trip were to carry out the necessary data collection and research activities to:

- Increase our knowledge around the specific social and economic contexts of Albania to better inform our work with Albanian nationals
- Better understand the myriad of push and pull factors of migration
- Measure the reliability of the information and advice we currently provide to our clients who are returning to Albania and to gain further insight into their resettlement needs
- Develop our network and strengthen relationships and connections with agencies and organisations who can potentially help our clients upon returning
- Document the personal resettlement experiences of our clients' who have returned to Albania

The work conducted on this trip links to Hibiscus' strategic objectives to:

- Increase our knowledge around the specific social and economic contexts of Albania to better inform our work with Albanian nationals
- Build and use an evidence-based methodology that will inform the development of our services, respond to partners, and allow us to influence policy
- Make efficient use of our existing resources, networks and contacts to increase our knowledge, and articulate the voice of those we support more effectively
- Share and deploy our knowledge powerfully through commissioning and disseminating analysis, research, and evidence
- Gain more insight into the push factors relating to migration
- Present our messages through informed communications, including those of our partners that reflect the voice of our clients, our mission and impact
- Develop our networks with institutions; both nationally and internationally and to extend our knowledge, influence, and reach

The information and data were collected through:

- Expert interviews
- Interviews with clients
- Observation and cultural immersion

POPULATION AND DEMOGRAPHICS

Albania is located on the Balkan Peninsula in the south-eastern region of Europe and shares borders with Greece, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Kosovo. Albania has a current population of nearly 3 million and is a relatively densely populated country with 102 people per square kilometre¹. 58% of the population of Albania live in major metropolitan cities such as Tiranë (over 750,000 inhabitants), Durrës (201,519), Vlorë (141,513), Elbasan (126,703), and Shkodër (102,075).

In terms of its population, official statistics on ethnicity show that Albania is a fairly homogenous country, with 97% of the population identifying as White Albanian. Other cultural ethnic groups, such as Aromanians and Romani, and other nationalities, such as Greeks, Macedonians and Montenegrins, are also recognised

in Albania². It is important to note that individuals and organisations from minoritised groups have criticised the census data for not being representative and underestimating their population size, particularly as a result of laws that require respondents to exclusively declare the ethnicity that was first listed on their birth certificate³. This suggests that there is in fact greater diversity in the country, but official figures are likely to obscure data regarding certain ethnic groups.

Regarding religion, Albania was the first country in the world to officially become an atheist state in 1967⁴. Most religions in Albania coexist harmoniously, with 58% of Albanians being Muslim, 17% Christian, and 25% belonging to another minoritised religion or having no religion.



¹ World Population Review. Albania. (Online) Retrieved from: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/albania-population>

² World Atlas. Ethnic Groups of Albania. (Online) Retrieved from: <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/what-is-the-ethnic-composition-of-albania.html>

³ Krasniqi, G. 2012. The Politics of Numbers and Identity in Albania. Citizenship in Southeast Europe. (Online) Retrieved from: <https://www.citsee.eu/blog/politics-numbers-and-identity-albania>

⁴ Hargitai, Q. 2016. The country that's famous for tolerance. BBC Travel. (Online) Retrieved from: <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20161024-the-worlds-most-tolerant-country>

POVERTY AND POLITICS



Although Albania is not yet a member of the European Union, it received its candidacy status to join the group in 2014⁵. Since then, the Albanian government has introduced new strategies to meet the convergence criteria and to accelerate towards sustainable economic development and to significantly improve infrastructure. Despite these efforts, the challenging and complex transition from an isolated and deindustrialised communist state with minimal diplomatic foreign relations to a democratic parliamentary republic has hindered economic and social development⁶. Today, Albania exists today as one of the poorest countries in the European continent.

Poverty and economic deprivation in Albania are an intersectional phenomenon shaped by a number of overlapping and compounding factors, such as one's employment status, age, gender, ethnicity, geography, and level of education. Unemployment is a significant issue in Albania, with a pre-pandemic unemployment rate of 11.5% in 2019⁷, which is significantly higher than the European Union average of 6.7%⁸. Research demonstrates that unemployment in Albania is often long-term, with 66% of unemployed people unemployed for more than a year⁹.

⁵ Albania. European Commission. (Online) Retrieved from: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/enlargement-policy/negotiations-status/albania_en

⁶ Borgen Project. Why is Albania Poor? (Online) Retrieved from: <https://borgenproject.org/why-is-albania-poor/>

⁷ World Bank. Unemployment - Albania. (Online) Retrieved from: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?locations=AL>

⁸ World Bank. Unemployment - European Union. (Online) Retrieved from: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?locations=EU>

⁹ Honorati, M., Johansson De Silva, S., Kupets, O. and Berger, S.. 2018. Job Dynamics in Albania: A Note Profiling Albania's Labor Market. World Bank.

According to a report on in-work poverty in Albania, 59% of Albanians living in poverty are working. The majority of those living in poverty are agriculture workers or work in elementary occupations or in craft or commercial sectors. Education plays a critical role in shaping people's socioeconomic experiences, with those who are experiencing in-work poverty having had fewer years of education (9.6) when compared to those who are above the poverty line (11.5)¹⁰.

There are also considerable differences in income and poverty levels between rural and urban areas, with rural populations more likely to experience greater levels of poverty compared to those living in metropolitan areas⁶. However, poverty in urban areas has increased significantly in recent years given the increased rates of rural to urban migration, with people seeking more opportunities and improved living standards in the city¹¹. Many rural communities reside in mountainous regions and highlands and work primarily in farms and agriculture. Approximately 25% of the rural population in Albania live and work on farms that do not provide enough income for subsistence⁶.

A significant body of research demonstrates that women and children are at increased risk of poverty¹², as well people with certain disabilities and those from minoritised communities, such as the Roma. Roma communities encounter considerable obstacles in accessing community welfare and social services and are at heightened risk of violence and abuse as a result of high levels of societal prejudice, discrimination and ostracism¹³. This prejudice manifests in Roma children having difficulty accessing mainstream education, as well as adults struggling to access employment opportunities.

In summary, poverty, material deprivation and unemployment remain systemic and pervasive across Albania despite the government's efforts to improve standards of living and economic opportunities as a criteria for joining the EU. Employment, education and geographical location are key determining factors of poverty, as is gender and ethnicity. The myriad elements of poverty; social, economic and psychological, have profound impacts on many across Albania.

¹⁰ Jorgoni, E. 2019. European Social Policy Network Thematic Report on In-work poverty: Albania.

¹¹ Laçaj, E. and Hysa, E. 2018. A Survey on Poverty in Albania: Comparison between Rural and Urban. *EuroEconomica*, 37(1).

¹² UN Women. Women and Men in Albania. 2021. <https://albania.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/06/women-and-men-in-albania-2021>

¹³ Turner, E. Poverty among Romanians in Albania. Borgen Project. 2019. <https://borgenproject.org/poverty-among-romanians-in-albania/>

MIGRATION AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Albania has faced considerable rates of depopulation as a result of large-scale emigration since the end of communist rule in 1991¹⁴. Statistics from 2011–2021 show that approximately 42,000 people emigrate each year from Albania, with the main destinations being other European countries, the United Kingdom and America¹⁵. The main driving factor behind emigration is the systemic and pervasive levels of poverty previously outlined, which contribute to people seeking out better employment and educational opportunities elsewhere¹⁶.

Human trafficking is a major problem in Albania, as the country has become a key route for traffickers in and out of Europe¹⁷. Individuals who are trafficked are typically recruited and exploited through promises of false employment or marriage in other countries. The latest figures from a U.S led report entitled “2020 Trafficking in Persons” demonstrate that 96 ‘potential victims’ and 7 ‘officially recognized victims’ were identified by the Albanian government and NGOs over one year¹⁷. However, these official statistics are believed to be a gross underestimation; the illegal and underground nature of trafficking makes it inherently difficult to quantify¹⁸. Additionally, inadequate identification efforts and a lack of victim protection have been noted as further barriers to understanding the full extent of trafficking across the country. In the UK, the most recent data on trafficking shows that 1,638 Albanians were referred to the National Referral Mechanism, which represents 16% of all potential victims referred in 2020¹⁹.

The Albanian government has increased their efforts against trafficking in recent years, however elimination is a long way off and the threat remains significant and prevalent¹⁷. Some areas that need critical improvement include:

- Stricter prosecution and conviction of traffickers
- Stronger mechanisms for the identification and protection of victims of vulnerable populations (such as those who have committed unlawful acts whilst being trafficked)
- Increased allocation of funds and resources for safe houses, shelters and welfare services for the long-term care and reintegration of victims
- Improved training for officials and front-line workers to be able to identify trafficked individuals
- Implementation of a victim-centred approach during investigation, prosecution, and court proceedings

¹⁴ Carletto, C., Davis, B., Stampini, M. and Zezza, A., 2006. A country on the move: international migration in post-communist Albania. *International Migration Review*, 40(4), pp.767-785.

¹⁵ Institute of Statistics. The population of Albania. 2022. Retrieved from: <http://www.instat.gov.al/en/statistical-literacy/the-population-of-albania/>

¹⁶ Migration Policy Institute. 2015. Embracing Emigration: The Migration-Development Nexus in Albania. Retrieved from: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/embracing-emigration-migration-development-nexus-albania>

¹⁷ US Department of State. 2020. 2020 Trafficking in Persons Report: Albania. Retrieved from: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-trafficking-in-persons-report/albania/>

¹⁸ European Observatory of Crimes and Security. 2017. Human Trafficking in Albania. Retrieved from: <https://www.eu-ocs.com/human-trafficking-albania/>

¹⁹ UK Home Office. 2021. Modern Slavery: National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify statistics UK, end of year summary, 2020.

In addition to the critical need for governmental policy changes, international organisations and activists are placing greater focus on the need for changes to cultural and social norms in order to address trafficking in Albania²⁰. Women and children, especially from poorer rural areas, are the main targets of traffickers, which reflects patriarchal power relations and women having less opportunities and ownership within families and society more broadly²¹. High rates of intimate partner violence in Albania perpetuates women's risk of being trafficked²². Women who are experiencing abuse are particularly vulnerable to exploitation; traffickers' proposal of a better life can be perceived as the only means to escape.

Research demonstrates that trafficked women often face contexts of forced labour or sex work. Women trafficked for sexual

exploitation frequently end up in European countries such as Kosovo, Greece, Italy, or the United Kingdom. Children who are exploited by traffickers, typically those from Romani and Balkan-Egyptian communities, often face forced begging or seasonal work¹⁷.

Many organisations have been working with the Albanian government towards 'Resolution 1325' which is a UN Security Council resolution, set up in 2000, that addresses the impact of conflict on women and the importance of women's full and equal participation in post-conflict reconstruction and humanitarian responses²³. This is particularly in relation to the short but violent civil conflict that occurred in Albania in 1997, in which the trafficking of and violence towards women and girls was utilised as weapons of retaliation and the impact of this is still felt today.



²⁰ UN Women. Breaking the cycle of human trafficking in Albania. 2016. Retrieved from: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2016/3/breaking-the-cycle-of-human-trafficking-in-albania>

²¹ BBC News. 2017. Human trafficking: Poor women and girls targeted in Albania. Retrieved from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-39047787>

²² Sereni, A. 2016. Human Trafficking: The case of Albania. UK Says No More. Retrieved from: <https://uksaysnomore.org/human-trafficking-the-case-of-albania/>

²³ Operation 1325. Albania's implementation of UNSCR 1325. 2017. <https://operation1325.se/wp-content/uploads/Women-Count-Albania-2017.pdf>

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Albania is a patriarchal society with a strong male-dominated culture that generates notable gender inequalities. Government efforts to address these disparities are falling short, with Albania ranked as 42 out of 162 countries on the Gender Inequality Index²⁴. Human Rights' organisations continue to raise serious concerns about gender inequality in Albania, particularly in regard to gender-based violence (GBV)²⁵. GBV, perpetuated by traditional and embedded cultural norms regarding women and their societal roles, is widespread across the country and cultural changes are taking place at a slow pace.

According to the 2018 report 'Violence against women and girls in Albania' conducted in partnership with the Albanian Institute of Statistics and UNDP, more than half of the women sampled across 3,443 households between the ages of 15-74 have suffered some form of violence during their lifetime²⁵. The most common type of violence experienced was dating violence (66%), followed by domestic violence (47%), and sexual harassment (18%).

In addition, 37% of the women interviewed said they were currently experiencing some type of violence. The report describes how

domestic violence in Albania is deeply rooted within the 'strict gender identities and roles, patriarchal authority, adherence to an honour-and-shame system, customs of hierarchical ordering within the family, and intergenerational family control' (pp.12).

Statistics from the same report demonstrated the pervasive nature of harmful beliefs around domestic violence; half of the survey's respondents agreed that violence within marriage is a private matter that does not require intervention, and that the burden of blame falls on a woman if her intimate partner hits her²⁵. These beliefs contribute to feelings of shame and women often not being willing to talk about or disclose situations of abuse, leading to the underreporting of GBV, as well as women seeking out alternative, dangerous escape routes. The study's authors described how many in Albania 'consider domestic violence to be a private, family matter and a normal part of marriage and family life. Because domestic violence often happens behind closed doors and is not openly discussed... victims typically suffer in silence' (pp. 29). In corroboration with this, a study led by AWEN with a sample of over 1000 young men and women across Albania, found a prevalence of attitudes that placed blame on women²⁶.

²⁴ UNDP. 2020. Albania: Briefing note for countries on the 2020 Human Development Report. Retrieved from: <https://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/Country-Profiles/ALB.pdf>

²⁵ UN Women. 2018. National Population Survey: Violence Against Women and Girls in Albania. Retrieved from: <https://www.undp.org/albania/publications/national-population-survey-violence-against-women-and-girls-albania>

²⁶ Dhëmbo E., Duci V., Intimate partner violence and sexual violence among young people in Albania. AWEN. 2021. https://awenetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/AWEN-Dhuna-EN-pages-web_compressed.pdf

Informed by our site-visits and discussions with grass-roots organisations working closely on these issues, we came to understand that traditional power relations, particularly in rural areas, often restrict women to the domestic sphere, with women being almost exclusively responsible for domestic labour and care duties²⁷. Paternalistic gender roles mean that women face significant challenges in relation to property rights. Although Albanian legislation formally recognises gender equality in practice, its implementation has been too often hindered by discriminatory cultural and social attitudes and practices at the institutional and community levels. With only 8% of women owning land in Albania, inequality in property ownership is exacerbated by women's lack of knowledge around their rights and entitlements²⁸. At the policy making level, women are far less likely to participate in political or economic decision-making processes, making it challenging to change laws and legislation around gender-based violence²⁹.

Furthermore, women and girls in rural and remote areas, as well those from minoritised communities such as Roma and Egyptian women, continue to have limited access to primary healthcare and sexual and reproductive services and are often unaware of the availability of such services²⁹.

Recent lockdowns caused by COVID-19 have exacerbated many struggles faced by women. The UNDP has reported that a lack of employment opportunities, financial resources, safe places, protection measures and freedoms to go out have led to acute increase of rates of violence experienced by women³⁰. Furthermore, much of the funding earmarked for specialised women's support services in local municipalities has been diverted to deal with the pandemic.

²⁷ World Vision. 2021. Changing underlying cultural and social norms in Albania. Retrieved from: <https://www.wvi.org/stories/albania/changing-underlying-cultural-and-social-norms-albania>

²⁸ UN Women. 2018. One room, her only home An Albanian woman's struggle to claim her property rights. Retrieved from: <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2018/03/feature-an-albanian-womans-struggle-to-claim-her-property-rights>

²⁹ Yoair Blog. 2020. Women's Rights in Albania in Contemporary Society. <https://www.yoair.com/blog/womens-rights-in-albania-in-contemporary-society/>

³⁰ Kushti, N.. 2020. A crisis within a crisis; when a pandemic creates violence. UNDP. Retrieved from: <https://www.undp.org/blog/crisis-within-crisis-when-pandemic-creates-violence>

EXPERIENCE AND IMMERSION

Through our cultural observation and immersion, we learnt about the impact, effects and factors of migration and immigration.

Date	Meeting/Event
MONDAY 27TH SEPTEMBER	AWEN CARITAS
TUESDAY 28TH SEPTEMBER	IOM (TIRANA) VATRA (TIRANA) TJETER VIZION NGO (ELBASSAN) CLIENT MEETING (ELBASSAN)
WEDNESDAY 29TH SEPTEMBER	DIFFERENT AND EQUAL QUENDRA FOKUS CLIENT MEETINGS (TIRANA)
THURSDAY 30TH SEPTEMBER	MARY WARD FOUNDATION BRITISH EMBASSY CULTURAL VISIT – BUNKERS
FRIDAY 1ST OCTOBER	AWSP (DURRES) CULTURAL VISIT - DUREES
SATURDAY 2ND OCTOBER	CHILDREN'S HUMAN RIGHTS CENTRE

AWEN

AWEN, which stands for “Albanian Women Empowerment Network”, is an NGO that was informally registered in 2009. It organises and brings together a network of women’s organisations across the country. The main area of focus is advocating for women’s rights and delivering services to women, particularly to those experiencing GBV or who are victims of trafficking. The Network has a total of 9 organisations across Albania.

Alongside their frontline work, AWEN is campaigning through mechanisms such as the ‘Istanbul Convention’ to put pressure on the government to set up more women’s shelter spaces across Albania. Currently, there is minimal shelter space to facilitate reintegration for women who are returning to Albania having been trafficked, and to support those that are potential victims and particularly vulnerable to exploitation. AWEN expressed serious concern regarding the 2017 governmental policy change that downgraded trafficking from a serious crime prosecuted at the highest court, to a crime prosecuted by district judges. AWEN described how this has made it much more challenging to prevent trafficking and to protect women who are trafficked both internally and externally.



AWEN highlighted how GBV against women and girls is a critical concern in Albania, maintained by entrenched patriarchal power relations and normalisation of intimate partner violence. They stressed how the crisis of GBV, as well as wider gender inequality and lack of opportunities for women, creates a context in which women and girls are extremely vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking. AWEN described the prevalence of a cycle of abuse, with women who are trafficked often having already experienced abuse and violence within their families or intimate relationships.



AWEN has seen a significant increase in the use of social media as a form of recruitment used by traffickers across Albania. Traffickers are utilising social media to advertise a better life, exhibiting images of other women and girls who have travelled to the UK. Many of these stories and imagery are fabricated but utilised to capture the imagination of other women and influence decision making to leave home.

In reality, many women that end up leaving home are coerced into extremely precarious situations, often exploited via forced labour or sex work within the UK. One of AWEN's main projects is centred around education; working closely with those within rural villages who may be most at risk of persuasion and exploitation. According to AWEN, 80% of those who are trafficked are under the age of 18.

AWEN's grassroots community work has given them insight into how poverty and a lack of state social support act as significant driving factors for many to leave home. AWEN informed us that 95% of social support in Albania is currently provided by international agencies. As previously described, rates of poverty in rural areas in Albania are extremely high; it is these areas that are particularly targeted by traffickers. AWEN described the interconnected relationship between poverty and deprivation and higher levels of intimate partner violence, mediated by familial stress, food insecurity and being unable to keep children in school. It is these contexts in which overseas exploitation and labour is conceived to be the sole way out.

AWEN aims to support those returning through their network, however they expressed the current challenges related to extremely low funding. AWEN is currently connected to some shelter spaces that support women who are returning home by providing psychological support and carrying out trauma-informed work. However, AWEN are finding it extremely challenging to advertise and engage women as a result of the fact that once women have faced exploitation and trafficking, they are often rejected by their families when returning home, identifying shame as a significant force in Albania. A lack of familial support is particularly risky given that Albanian state support is only provided for 12 weeks for an individual classified as a victim of trafficking.

AWEN highlighted that those returning need to be supported to enable them to meet their essential daily needs, but also require a strong integration plan to help them rebuild their lives, particularly if cut off from their families. More support, from international agencies and from the state, is critical to prevent women from re-entering the trafficking system and continuing to be vulnerable to pressure and exploitation.

Caritas is a humanitarian NGO working in Albania that works to improve the living conditions of those most vulnerable. It was founded in 1993, although it has been part of Caritas International as a wider network since 1994. Caritas works across a wide variety of grass-roots programmes, spanning health and social services, women's rights issues, emergency relief, support for migrants and refugees and advocacy against trafficking of the Roma community.

In Albania, Caritas supports the government in identifying victims of trafficking by:

- Conducting rigorous police training programmes (although this presents challenges due to high police turnover)
- Spearheading a successful campaign to introduce safe and private spaces in police stations for victims of trafficking to share and disclose their experiences, instead of interviews being conducted within the usual main police room
- Training prosecutors about trafficking issues
- Raising awareness and educating communities around the risks and realities of trafficking utilising methods of positive stories, exhibitions, concerts, theatre productions and summer schools

Many of those who are trafficked come from communities residing in Northern regions of the country, hence Caritas is currently focusing many of their programmes in these areas. Caritas has found that 50-58%

of victims of trafficking are young girls from rural areas. Caritas described how traffickers are typically well known in small rural villages, due the tight-knit culture of communities. Caritas hope that their work will bring awareness to the dangers of forced migration. Caritas have previously worked on projects supporting victims of trafficking. However, the lack of secure funding impedes their ability to offer a long-term support.

Caritas also runs projects along the border of Albania supporting refugees arriving from Syria, Afghanistan and Egypt, providing support for the most vulnerable, including unaccompanied children. Currently, there is an increase in Filipino migrants who are often trafficked into the country to work in massage parlours.

Two detention centres were set up by the EU in 2010, however these remain shut due to a lack of eligible detainees. Albania is mainly a transition country for refugees; Caritas explained that many people do not want to settle in Albania from overseas due to the high levels of poverty and lack of opportunities. Migrants, especially children and those from Roma communities, are particularly vulnerable to traffickers when travelling near the borders.

In terms of resettlement for those returning to Albania, Caritas described how high levels of cultural stigma represent serious barriers, with families often rejecting those identified as victims of trafficking. This results in a profound lack of material support or a safety-net, particularly as living expenses are much higher outside of rural areas.

INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) was established in Albania in 1992, representing a lead governmental partner, yet also working closely with non-governmental agencies. In September 2016, the IOM became officially affiliated with the UN Summit for Refugees and Migrants. The IOM In Albania works within several capacities, including:

- Migration policy, research and legislation
- Migration management; assisted voluntary return and reintegration, counter human trafficking, immigration and border management, labour migration, migration and development
- Operations and emergencies
- Prevention of violent extremism

During our visit to Albania, we met with those who work alongside migration management, including counter human trafficking. The IOM team explained the novel trafficking trends they have observed across the country. There has been a recent increase in the recruitment of highly educated women who may seek to expand their employment opportunities yet are deceived in the process. Additionally, there have been increasing cases of women recruited who are victims of domestic violence; those who seek a new and safe livelihood overseas as a result of their struggles and lack of support and resources at home. For this reason, the IOM, alongside other NGOs support victims of domestic violence and trafficking to prevent and minimise re-trafficking. They offer a package of support, such as those included in this report, and Hibiscus is currently able to refer

cases to the IOM. Available support includes access to accommodation, employment support, free medical care and reintegration. However, the scale and reach of support has been severely limited due to lack of funding.

The IOM have recognised a critical need for a more simplified and rigorous procedure for recognising victims of trafficking, including in-depth training and resources. The IOM advocates that this training would be best placed at the community level, such as with teachers, social services, police, and NGOs working in the field. However, due to the decentralisation of the government, recent policy changes have made it harder to identify victims of trafficking and for individuals to successfully declare themselves as victims. This is partly due to low retention rates within the responsible section of the police force, creating a need for periodic and frequent training which is difficult due to lack of funding and resources.

The IOM continue to prioritise prevention, conducting numerous reports exploring the most effective ways to prevent modern-day slavery and trafficking. This research has been fruitful in acknowledging where resources should be focused and how those at risk of trafficking and victims can be best supported at the community level.



Vatra, set up in 1997, was one of the first organisations to work with victims of trafficking in Albania. They commenced their first project in conjunction with Italy to provide support for individuals being identified as victims of trafficking in police stations.

Through their work, they discovered that rates of trafficking were increasing and began to conduct campaigns focused on governmental policy change. This advocacy work proved difficult due to the government's reluctance to recognise the realities of the growing trends of trafficking. Vatra also started working in rural areas as well as urban areas because they discovered the high rates of trafficking among vulnerable rural communities. This work initially included conducting roundtables and education programmes, and providing informative resources for men, women and children in schools to explore the risks of trafficking, the realities of 'false promises' and encourage dialogue across communities. Through their work in police stations, they noticed that there was little to no support for those returning to Albania, often due to deeply entrenched stigma resulting in families rejecting women and children who have been trafficked. Simultaneously, the lack of institutional support from the state, leaves women and children in contexts where they cannot meet their daily needs and are often left destitute.

In response to this profound lack of support and the fact that victims of trafficking were left without accommodation and often suffering from extremely poor mental health and impacts of trauma, Vatra opened their first shelter in 2001. The shelter provided emergency relief, legal services, food and emotional support, with women able to stay for up to 3 weeks. Vatra is able to support referred cases of victims of trafficking and have opened up emergency shelters and



rental apartments in which women can stay for up to 6 months in particularly vulnerable cases. Their reintegration support is centred on providing safe spaces for victims and working with other agencies to provide a full package of support for up to 5 years. Alongside their frontline work, Vatra also work with the government to support the identification of victims, which is particularly necessary due to the fact that only around 10% of victims report to the police. Perceptions and fear of the police play a contributing factor in this; with commonly held beliefs that corrupt police officers work alongside traffickers.

Vatra are happy to work with Hibiscus to provide support for people who have been trafficked; either through access to psycho-social services or through helping to establish micro businesses. However, they warned us that this support represents a drop in the ocean against the systemic lack of support that contributes to extremely high rates of re-trafficking for those that are removed from the UK and sent back to Albania as returnees.

Tjeter Vizion work primarily with minors aged between 6-18 years, managing a multi-functional youth centre within the local community, incorporating youth activities, events and skills training.

They also run a shelter to support minors and work closely with police and social services, conducting formal interviews with minors who are victims of trafficking. Once minors have been identified as victims of trafficking, they are able to stay in the shelter with returnees further supported with skills training and micro-business development.

The shelter receives partial government funding, covering the salaries of shelter staff and food. However, external funding sources make up the bulk of the budget. The reliance on external funding has proved extremely challenging for the organisation given that there is often an underestimation of the scale and magnitude of trafficking into Europe by overseas governments, including the UK.

Tjeter Vizion explained that the main cycle of recruitment often starts with relatives as the first point of contact. They described how young people from Roma communities

are often coerced using violence or as a means to support their families and enter contexts of drug-muggling and criminal gangs. Tjeter Vizion also reported that many who are trafficked are promised jobs in tourism or hospitality, however once they arrive, are coerced into sex work or begging. Extreme fear and vulnerability often prevent individuals from being able to escape these situations, perpetuated by entrenched stigma that prevents them from being able to return home to their communities. It is these deeply embedded issues that make providing the right support for returnees extremely challenging.

There are also issues of severe mistrust of the police, with many perceiving them as embedded parts of the wider trafficking networks. Although Tjeter Vizion have conducted rigorous training of police because officers are often on yearly role rotations, specialised training is inefficient and redundant. This is one of the biggest issues faced by organisations working to eliminate trafficking, without trained officers, the prospect of interactions with police act as a huge deterrent for victims.

DIFFERENT AND EQUAL

Established in 2004, Different and Equal support all migrants who have returned as well as those who have been victims of trafficking (VOT) and modern-day slavery. They provide rented accommodation and run a long-term programme to help VOTs and returnees integrate into society, often providing care lasting between 2 to 5 years. The length of care depends on the individual's relative needs or security issues, including instances of pregnancy or where there is a minor involved. Different and Equal have a multi-disciplinary team spanning case managers (social workers), doctors, teachers and psychologists.



Different and Equal also provide professional courses for VOTs, collaborate with institutions and other organisations, and inform the government in relation to advocacy and rights.

In terms of recruitment for trafficking, Different and Equal explained how many women are recruited through false promises of marriage, often targeting women who are divorced, or who may be under familial pressure to get married. Other false promises also include guarantees of legitimate work or study outside the country; instead facing contexts of criminal gang activity, sex work or distributing illegal drugs upon arrival. Many victims often do not want to disclose their realities due to entrenched stigma and fear of repercussions from families, or the threat of divorce or violence.

Different and Equal noticed that the number of VOT cases referred by the police was extremely low, often due to the fear of reporting to the police and authorities. Since mobile units were set up by charities and NGOs, rates of identification have been increasing through informal referrals and interviews.

Different and Equal have also worked on a lived-experience advocacy model, working with victims to speak up directly to authorities to appeal for more action, training and support. This is done through their women's centre, which has numerous activities for those in the shelter and for those in the nearby communities, offering a safe space, activities such as arts, crafts, media and micro business revenue.

QUENDRA FOKUS



Quendra Fokus started in 1997 to support children with mental health issues and then re-registered as an organisation to support children in need and their families more broadly.

Quendra Fokus provide training for professional and statutory staff, such as police, doctors, lawyers and social workers who deal with cases of child abuse and trafficking. For example, they have provided 'interview methodology' training designed for police interviewing VOT. This is available on the ministry of police website so that police who are new to the role can better support victims despite frequent annual turnover in personnel. This work runs in tandem with their frontline work with children who have been trafficked and victims of child abuse, including the provision of counselling and mental health care.

There have been major challenges in supporting those with PTSD caused by the trauma of trafficking. Often the disorder and severe impacts of trauma are not recognised within traditional mental health services; patients are often kept in hospital for only 24 hours and then discharged into the community. Quendra Fokus explained how an absence of continued support, with limited shelters only available for up to one month, increases the risks of re-trafficking, with victims vulnerable to being exploited by their perpetrators again.

Quendra Fokus described how many individuals are recruited outside of schools within rural areas and poorer communities, again highlighting the lure of 'false promises' of work or study, false marriages or relationships. Quendra Fokus explained how children from Roma communities typically face the highest risk of being trafficked, as they often lack a stable support system. Despite many people being aware of the dangers of trafficking, Quendra Fokus described how communities and families often still believe, using the quote; "it's like salt in the water, everybody knows it is there but everyone pretends not to see".

The organisation felt that a real lack of long-term support contributed to those caught in the vicious cycle having limited capacity to meet their needs. They were adamant that organisations need to collaborate to try to provide as much support as possible, to advocate to make authorities more aware of the needs of victims, and to educate authorities and governments abroad of the scale of forced migration from Albania. Quendra Fokus are committed to eliminating the cycle of abuse many go through and supporting those returning in trying to rebuild their lives, especially in terms of mental health and basic resource provision, albeit limited.

MARY WARD LORETO FOUNDATION



Mary Ward began their work in Northern Albania, due to this being the region with the highest rates of trafficking and GBV, combined with perceptions of the region having some of the most traditional and patriarchal cultural beliefs and power relations. Mary Ward began supporting the identification of victims, as well as reintegration and rehabilitation, and frequently refers to other services for emergency support.

Mary Ward set up a listening centre for women to come and speak about their experiences in a safe space and to understand what support is available to them. Support provided ranges from psychological services, vocational training, employment support and accommodation provision.

The organisation described their understanding of trafficking recruitment trends, explaining that individuals and families who return to Albania prosperous and relatively wealthy having spent time in the UK in the 1990s act as an incentive for trafficking networks. Furthermore, as reiterated by many other organisations, the high prevalence of GBV in the North creates

contexts of high vulnerability to coercion through 'false promises' of marriage, or a romantic relationship or being able to escape abusive situations. Mary Ward explained how women who are faced with experiences of trafficking, modern-day slavery and exploitation cannot return home due to family stigma. They reiterated how culturally, women who divorce can be rejected from families and communities, making them more vulnerable to traffickers and perpetrators.

May Ward informed us that Albanian authorities seem reluctant to acknowledge the scale of trafficking statistics across the country, often claiming that those from Northern regions chose to go to the UK and Europe. Mary Ward is able to form connections with and offer a community of support for those returning. They have seen that many returnees, despite leaving behind extremely traumatic contexts, do not seek specialised support and disclose their experiences of trafficking for fear of familial rejection. The team at Mary Ward even expressed that it may be safer for many to return to these contexts than it is to be open with their communities and receive the necessary support.

FOREIGN COMMONWEALTH DEVELOPMENT OFFICE (FCDO)

The Modern-Day Slavery project, funded by the British Home Office, is a two-year fund running from since January 2020, that aims to tackle trafficking and is split into four targeted objectives:

- Increase awareness of the dangers of trafficking, in particular targeting those vulnerable to trafficking using social media and TV ads
- Fostering economic opportunity
- Working with shelters and providing tailor-made integration plans for victims
- Providing training for the police academy and building capacity

The British embassy has been holding focus groups to understand the reasons that people may leave Albania; immigration push factors such as poverty, deprivation and unemployment. Focus groups with young women demonstrate a real sense of anger in relation to gender inequality and the relative lack of opportunity for women, coupled with a strong desire for these institutional issues to be tackled.

These discussions highlighted the importance of providing opportunities to address the root driving factors of trafficking, which is why the idea of investing in hotspot areas of trafficking, such as Kukes, was explored. However, a remaining challenge is the perceptions of relative deprivation felt in comparison to individuals and families who have returned from other EU countries and now have the expendable income to build larger houses and buy cars. Providing local economic opportunities that will raise personal income to the same extent is unlikely. However, promising future initiatives include trying to transform Kukes into a tourist destination, which will hopefully provide youth employment opportunities.

In terms of advocacy, the FCDO in Albania highlighted the critical need for specific legislation changes around the issue of trafficking. Finally, regarding education and awareness, one of the FCDO's main aims is to expose the realities of and dangers of trafficking.

ASSOCIATION OF WOMEN WITH SOCIAL PROBLEMS (ASWP)



ASWP started its work in 1999, initially as the organisation of 'Women with Social Problems' and later the organisation of 'Gender Peace and Security', as a member of AWEN network.

ASWP was founded to support refugees from the Kosovo war, when Durrës city was a refuge for over 1000 refugees from Kosovo and regular citizens were taking refugees into their homes. During this time, there was additional pressure on Albania as it was transitioning from a communist government. Lots of people left the country to settle in other EU countries including the UK and those who left continued to financially support those who were left back at home.

In 2000, the organisation was formally founded and has focused on:

- Trafficking issues: due to its nature as a port town, Durrës is where a lot of women and children who are exploited are located to
- Youth issues: ASWP opened a youth centre to give hope to young people
- Women's support: ASWP opened its first rehabilitation centre in 2001 to support women who experienced trafficking and GBV, including domestic violence. This centre continues to be funded by Swedish funders

The organisation's day to day work focuses on supporting women who experience Gender-Based Violence, including trafficking and domestic abuse. They also offer training to police officers on the importance of providing a safe environment for women to disclose and report. The organisation has trained police officers in every city in Albania; a total of 240 police officers have been trained so far.

AWSP have supported many women returning from the UK and shared some of their stories with us. They described how entering the prison system can perpetuate stigma for women who have been trafficked and sets individuals back on the cycle of exploitation. They shared their experiences of working with women who had been trafficked abroad after being trafficked internally, shaped by women's perceptions that being trafficked abroad may be the safer option.

In terms of the factors that contribute towards high rates of trafficking in Albania, AWSP identified:

- Women having minimal familial support or experiencing abuse and domestic violence.
- Patriarchal power relations across society.
- Lack of regular migration routes available and difficulty of being granted asylum due to Albania being deemed a safe country.
- Blood feuds: long standing conflicts between families that typically involve retaliatory violence/killings and threatens the safety of men and women³¹.

ASWP are very happy to work with Hibiscus to support men and women who return to Albania. Through their work on the ground, they perceive the nature of migration for the majority of Albanians to be centred around deception and false promises, arguing that the majority would likely be deemed victims of trafficking or modern-day slavery.

³¹ Operazione Colomba. 2017. Descriptive document on the phenomenon of "hakmarrja" and "gjakmarrja" to raise awareness among Albanian and international institutions. Retrieved from: https://www.operazionecolomba.it/docs/Report_ING-2017.pdf

HUMAN RIGHTS HOME OF ALBANIA

Human Rights Home is a hub of multiple organisations that support the rights of marginalised communities in Albania, focusing on:

- Children's rights
- Women's rights
- Prisoners' rights
- Gender Equality
- LGBTQIA+ rights (Pink Embassy)

The first organisation of the hub was founded in March 1996 and has 25 years of experience working in the field of children's rights. They set up a National Childhood helpline funded by UNICEF and the Albanian government, which protects children from sexual violence and provides legal advice. It also works with EKPAT on preventing trafficking of children.

They shared with us the most pressing push and pull migration factors and included:

- **Poverty and deprivation:** There are serious inequalities in Albania, with 40% of the population living under the poverty line and 4% of families living in extreme poverty. Poverty compels people to seek opportunities and livelihoods elsewhere and makes people vulnerable to exploitation at the hands of traffickers.
- **Cycles of violence and vulnerability:** The organisation interviewed 11 young people in prison and cited high levels of family violence, history of criminal activity, and extreme social and economic deprivation. Again, these challenging contexts promote individuals to seek other alternatives.

- **Drug industry:** Human Rights Home referenced a village in South Albania that had been dominated by drug organisations, often recruiting Roma and Egyptian youth labourers in contexts of forced labour - compelling people to seek safer, more meaningful and stable opportunities elsewhere.
- **Vulnerability of young girls:** representing the main demographic group who are recruited by traffickers. Human Rights Home cited the phenomenon of recruiters targeting schools.

Part of the educational work they do in detention centres and prisons is to ensure that those trapped within the criminal justice system are given the tools needed to succeed when reintegrated into society. Many people who have been involved in criminal activity abroad return to an even more vulnerable situation due to rejection from their communities.

Human Rights Home also work with Pink Embassy, an LGBTQIA+ rights organisation that organises pride marches and other cultural events and supports individuals experiencing abuse. The issues impacting the LGBTQIA+ community are not typically visible in Albania, despite rising levels of discrimination; in recent years there have been decreasing numbers of people coming to pride marches. Although the government has laws against discrimination, there is a considerable gap between policy and practice, particularly within access to employment and education. Pink Embassy are willing to support individuals within the LGBTQIA+ community who are returning to Albania.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Our time in Albania gave us a renewed understanding of the long-standing history of migration to the UK. The pervasiveness of poverty in Albania is the biggest driver of people seeking livelihoods elsewhere; many people see migration as one of the only ways to transcend poverty.

Socioeconomic deprivation, gender inequality and high rates of GBV, creates conditions in which women and children are particularly vulnerable to trafficking networks and industries.

Our conversations with clients and organisations working on the ground shed light on the considerable risks faced by those returning to Albania having been trafficked; family and community stigma that often lead to rejection and isolation, the serious mental and physical impacts of the trauma inherent to experiences of trafficking, continual financial debt owed to traffickers.

These risks were articulated by one client who told us; “The things I have seen in British prison, I grew up by 10 years. I never want to see them again. I never want to go back. I should have never witnessed it. I was forced into cannabis farming and I cannot unsee it. I am traumatised and no one understands.”

As a result of the minimal levels of governmental support, in which concrete support is only provided for a maximum of one month for returnees, it is voluntary agencies, such as the ones we spoke to, that provide the bulk of support for returnees to Albania. However, many of these agencies expressed that, despite having open projects and being willing to support where possible, they struggled with uptake and did not see many returnees seeking support.

The perceived corrupt relationship between traffickers and the police, creates a real sense of fear for returnees and presents a barrier to seeking support. Rates of re-trafficking are high and a real concern for the organisations we spoke to.

We ended our trip to Albania with a real sense of insecurity. The widespread fear and concern of trafficking and modern-day slavery was palpable across the communities and individuals we encountered. Yet, a promise of a better life or opportunities continues to present an appealing alternative to many. Education about the realities, dangers and nature of deception inherent to trafficking was voiced by all as a critical need.

However, the unique socioeconomic and political contexts of Albania, as a country continuing to negotiate the complex transition from a deindustrialised and diplomatically closed off state, has profound and lasting impacts on migration routes and trafficking networks. Many of the agencies and clients we encountered felt strongly that an open migration and work route would provide the most feasible solution to disentangling the trafficking cycles between the UK and Albania.

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