

Albania must enact reforms to combat sex trafficking, study urges

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(Phys.org)—Despite a number of measures undertaken by the government in Albania to curb sex trafficking, rigorous comprehensive legal and social reforms are needed to address the practices that perpetuate it, a new study led by a University of Illinois researcher indicates.

Patriarchal societal customs that disenfranchise women, along with high rates of poverty, domestic violence and governmental corruption have made Albania a pivotal location for the trafficking industry. The country serves as both a source of trafficking victims and a transit hub for moving victims through Russia and Eastern and [Western Europe](#).

Over the past decade, the Albanian government undertook a number of local and international initiatives to address [human trafficking](#) and improve the welfare of women, adopting policies addressing issues of gender equality, discrimination, domestic violence and governmental corruption. In a joint initiative with [Western countries](#), Albania also opened the first anti-sex trafficking center in Europe in 2001.

Although initially criticized by international aid organizations and European officials for being slow to recognize and respond to the problem, Albania implemented an anti-trafficking law in 2000. The law has been revised numerous times since being adopted, most recently in 2010, to bring it up to Western standards and international conventions. The new policy is credited with facilitating investigations into 51 sex trafficking offenders that were referred for prosecution.

However, the policy failed to address the societal practices that undermine women's well-being and render them vulnerable to exploitation, including the nation's lack of professional and [economic opportunities](#), its high rates of domestic violence and widespread corruption in the legal and law enforcement systems, the study indicated.

[Gender discrimination](#) remains a commonly accepted practice in the workplace. Albanian women, particularly in [rural areas](#), have difficulty finding employment, jobs that pay enough to lift them out of poverty and are often pressured to marry young to avoid being economic burdens to their families. Women who hastily marry often find themselves trapped in relationships in which they have no control over their financial resources and are the targets of domestic violence, which is so prevalent that some organizations estimate that it affects as many as 50 percent of Albanian women.

Divorced women, especially those who have children, become societal outcasts, increasing their vulnerability to traffickers, whose promises of comfortable marriages and lucrative employment are especially alluring to women seeking to escape poverty or violent relationships.

"[Domestic violence](#) really contributes to sex trafficking because women are used to being afraid of men, of being obedient and subservient, and that encourages victims to remain with their pimps once they're being trafficked," said the study's lead author Venera Bektashi, a professor of social work at the University of Illinois.

Bektashi was born in Kosovo and previously worked as the deputy director of the Albanian American Women's Organization, a cultural pride and support center in New York City.

Despite the passage of tough laws on trafficking, prosecution is rare, in part because victims are afraid to testify against their captors and have

little faith in law enforcement and justice systems that are rife with corruption. A report from the U.S. Department of State indicated that police were involved in 10 percent of cases of foreign victims trafficked through Albania.

Policies and enforcement efforts – which currently punish prostitutes but not the men who patronize them – should be reformed to "address the demand as well as the origin of the problem," Bekteshi said. "The men that are the buyers, they are also part of the problem. They should really understand that a huge proportion of these women are forced to engage in these activities."

An extensive awareness campaign mounted by the Albanian government seems to have been successful in reducing the number of Albanian women trafficked to other countries from 2002-2009, but the study suggests that sex trafficking within Albania's borders continues.

The awareness campaign needs to be updated frequently to keep women informed about the latest tricks used by traffickers to dupe victims and about legal job prospects in other countries as well as domestic abuse, Bekteshi said.

The study called for Albania's leaders to collaborate with leaders in Western nations, including Italy, to provide training and equipment so that Albanian police are better prepared. Posting trained social workers at border stations would aid in identifying trafficking victims, and providing free legal representation for victims and promoting utilization of the nation's new witness protection plan would encourage them to pursue prosecution.

Bekteshi completed the study while a postdoctoral fellow at Washington University Medical Center.

Eglantina Ghhermeni, a faculty member at the University of Tirana in Albania who has been engaged in research, training and lobbying for women's issues, and Mary Van Hook, a faculty member of the School of Social Work at the University of Central Florida, were co-authors of the study.

Their research was based upon interviews with service providers who assist trafficking victims in Tirana and Vlora, Albania; reviews of documents from the Albanian government; and studies conducted by Albanian and international nongovernmental organizations.

The study appeared recently in the *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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