

Safe houses: the cycle of suffer of women in Kosovo

PRISHTINA – These two young women have long packed for their transfer to a church-run shelter in Croatia. The country they wish to leave behind would not be able to give them a normal life. Fatmire, trafficked and forced into prostitution, with one abortion on her life story, has enough to be ostracized for the remainder of her life in this conservative society.

Arjeta has abandoned a six-month old baby, hers and her fathers. The father has been sentenced seven years in a trial. She contemplates suicide. “If I don’t leave (Kosovo), I will have to kill myself.” Her case had been widely covered by the media. Now she refuses to see anyone. “I don’t want to see him,” she says of her son.

They stay in a shelter, one of the seven existing in Kosovo, where women in extreme vulnerable conditions – victims of trafficking or other extreme abuse -- are offered basic life support and security.

The women are being trained basic subsistence skills, and made to live in a community, cook, clean and maintaining the shelters, and occupying themselves with different activities to beat the stress of such claustrophobic spaces.

Police records of the past years indicate an average of 30 identified women victims of human trafficking every year, though some NGOs and a visit to one of the shelters, where twenty bunk beds are squeezed in a room, suggest the numbers are higher. Most women are Kosovo Albanian.

“We don’t have the money to send them out of the country,” said Naime Sherifi, who heads the Safe Houses Network in Kosovo, a shelter coalition, and yet, “for some of the women we have it is impossible to continue living here.”

The shelters run into serious challenges in their job. Those run by non-government groups, have to provide for their security.

Some women go back to trafficking nets after spending time being ‘rehabilitated.’ “We have to support them for years because we can’t secure them decent jobs, housing and a normal life,” says Sakibe Doli, who manages a shelter in the southwestern Kosovo town of Gjakova.

The judicial system is so slow to make one suspect delays are intended to save traffickers from witnesses. There is lack of funding in those treatment houses, and social workers are sent to jail for corruption. Their children would not go to school, because of fear for their security.

There have been cases of police involved in trafficking women.

Kristina struggles to see the city beyond the grids on the heavily-draped window that morning the police brought her here. A 20-year-old Bulgarian, she was dropped to a flophouse in Ferizaj after being forced into a brothel in Belgrade. Desislava, another Bulgarian sheltered here, was killed one year ago, after she arrived from Belgrade.

Kristina says she came to Kosovo for some business, but ended in the sex market. She says the men who dealt with her are closely connected with men in power in Kosovo. This horrifies her.

Prosecution documents say Kristina was detained when she called a policeman in Ferizaj, trying to lure him as a client, but who ended up detaining her. She says the policeman had

been her regular client. The prosecutors give no information, citing the secrecy of the investigation. "I have no idea what I'm going to do," she says.

One of the shelters is directly managed by Kosovo's Justice Ministry. It shelters women whose abuse has been starkest.

Sherifi says the victims and the staff are often exposed to threats by people involved on human trafficking and accused of crimes against them.

Foreign victims like Kristina would be repatriated after spending between one and two years in the shelters. Most of them go back on their destinations wrecked emotionally and physically. Most of the cases opened against their pimps are left cold in Kosovo courts.

Valbona Jaha, who manages the shelter run by the Justice Ministry, says the work of the shelters is been hampered by the sluggishness of prosecutors and of courts. She calls the "witness protection" program run under, EULEX, the EU Mission of Rule of Law, is a fiasco. "There are police, prosecutor's office and court officials who have abused the victims," she says.

"We try to strengthen them psychologically and train them to appear before courts, but we never know who is handling the case, or what happens with them when their life is being handled by the judiciary." She tells the story of one woman, who would go back to the shelter because they fell on the claws of their pimps. "Tens of interviewed victims mention a name of a person responsible for their ordeal, and those persons are still enjoying impunity." Naime Sherifi admits as much. "One suspect was mentioned by at least eight women, but he was let go after having 'coffee' with the judge and investigator," she says. "We made efforts to bring a case to the court but it was useless." She says she is convinced the bosses of human trafficking are able to acquire valuable information about their victims from prosecutors, judges and police.

Some prosecutors were suspected to be 'privileged clients' in brothels where victims were forced into prostitution. There are bars in Prishtina where prosecutors were seen socializing with suspect pimps cleared of human trafficking charges.

Municipality chief prosecutor Aleksander Lumezi shrugs his shoulders. District Prosecutor Osman Kryeziu denies having heard of such cases. However, most denunciations about the abuse of victims by prosecutors and police are addressed to Kryeziu.

Police and courts have similar story to tell. Hamdi Ibrahim, a Prishtina District Court Judge, says that victims give up testimony because of pressure and threats. Many cases are forgotten, dragged intentionally so that the victims are let go back to their home countries before the case appears at the court. "In many cases, key witnesses go absent," he says. "They go back to their country of origin or they are again trapped on the networks of human trafficking."

Arben Paçarizi, who heads the police anti-trafficking unit, talks about cases when police were involved in threats and abuse against victims. "We stumbled into cases when the police had contacts with pimps," he says. "There are cases when human trafficking was helped especially by border police. Some of them were dismissed, in others, investigations are still going on."

But he also adds that the most effective method to crack human trafficking cases was the so called 'simulated bargain', when judges consent the police to go to brothels as

costumers. However, there are judicial districts where the judges do not allow the police to do this and there are cases when the police ended up misusing this duty. A judge from the Peja District Court says off the record he is aware of cases when the police used 'simulated bargain' and they got away without doing anything. He mentioned two, in Lausanne and Teuta motels. Paçarizi denies police involvement. But Kryeziu, the Prishtina chief prosecutor, says, "They should talk less and do more."

Police accuse shelter managers of inflating trafficking figures to attract more grants. The previous head of networks of NGOs that dealt managed most of the shelters was convicted in 2006 for abusing funds.

The shelter managers complain of insufficient funding. However none of them have a transparent balance of the grants they take. They don't have a permanent and thorough inspection how they manage them.

Shelter administrators say the cost of supporting a victim of trafficking is 315 Euros a month. The Ministry of Social Work gives 15,000 euros monthly to each shelter, which would be enough to support eight victims. The centers are crowded, especially after beginning to host domestic violence victims, as more of them are encouraged to report violence and abuse within the family.

The Centres for social work have to deal with the 'unwanted' babies. They usually send them to orphanages. It is often difficult to have them registered because orphanages demand their identities and they are not supposed be disclosed. This is problematic especially with children of incest who refused by people wanting to adopt.

The coordinator of a shelter in Peja, Resmije Tahiri, explains how complicated it becomes when a victim seeks abortion. "We have to insist on the clinics to hold the identity of the victims and of their children when they have to give birth," she says.

"The law bans us from disclosing the background of these babies" says Nezahate Salihu head o the SOS Village, which shelters abandoned children.

Veporre Shehu, who runs the Medica shelter, says the rehabilitation of victims is difficult because they are emotionally and physically devastated. They are paranoid. "They are depressed and traumatized. The society doesn't have capacity to deal with this."

Arjeta and Fatmire are waiting for their escape. Kristina is being repatriated, leaving behind a case that will probably be left cold in Kosovo courts.

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