



## Engaging the Community in the Process of Identification, Referral and Assistance of Victims of Trafficking

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Young People Against Prostitution and Human Trafficking:

The Greatest Violence Against Human Beings

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### Introduction

The paper presented below is a collection of the experience accumulated working in the organization “Different & Equal”. This NGO assist since 2004 victims of abuse, exploitation and human trafficking through shelter services and community services. In these years we have witnessed all the phases of the reintegration of human victims of trafficking, we have witnessed their fears and their courage, their sufferance and their hopes, their failures and their success.

Trafficking in the modern history of Albania is a phenomenon that began in the year 1990, after the fall of the communist regime in our country and when Albanians began to emigrate massively in Western Countries. It is estimated a number of 2300 individuals, victims of human trafficking identified from the 90’ until this year. Still this number is not expected to be exact, because it refers only to the individuals identified by the agencies as victims of trafficking or potential victims of trafficking, but to be sincere we don’t know the exact number because the most part of victims of trafficking may not have been identified and so on not included in this number. Still this number is too high considering that Albania has a population of only three millions of inhabitants.

Nowadays trafficking is still an acute problem for Albanian society. According to the last report of “Trafficking in Persons” of the American Department of State, Albania is ranked in Tier 2, as a country of origin and destination for trafficking victim. Around a hundred victims of trafficking are being identified each year in Albania. Still these numbers do not fully describe the situation of trafficking in Albania, being that trafficking is a hidden and organized crime and there may be many individuals under trafficking situation who are not identified. From our direct work in identifying and assisting victims of trafficking, we noticed that there are several areas and local communities which are more subjected to trafficking and exploitation. Usually those communities live in suburban areas of the big cities like Tirana or Durrës.

### Our Work

Considering the importance of early identification, in July 2013 there was established a Mobile Unit in Tirana, with the aim of identifying victims of trafficking in the communities and trying to get them out of the cycle of exploitation. It was the first Mobile Unit in Albania and we should firstly found out which was the right approach in order to identify and help without being exposed to greater risks.

So we identified some hot spot areas and communities where trafficking and exploitation occurred frequently. These piloting areas, which were informal areas of Tirana, were selected because of their extreme poverty, because of the continuous social problems (like domestic violence, high rate of unemployment etc) and also because we have statistics that in 10 years of the activity of the organization an important part of the girls we assisted were from these communities.

After choosing the communities, we try to explore all the resources and actors in the community who could help us through the process of the identification and assistance of potential victims of trafficking. We mostly identified people who knew very well the community and also were trusted people for the community. The major part of these people work in NGOs that are directly engaged in the work with vulnerable communities, or are teachers, members of religious communities, child protection units or social administrators of the community. We firstly try to increase their capacity in identifying victims of trafficking and then exploring their community in order to see if there are potential victims of trafficking that can be assisted or if there are individuals in risk of trafficking and is needed to be done prevention work. Increasing the capacity of identification and referral of the local actors in the community is very important in order to provide sustainability of the process even when

the Mobile Unit will not be in that community anymore. According to the Standard Operating Procedures for the Identification and Referral of Victims of Trafficking every agency in Albania that is engaged in working with vulnerable groups has the duty to report situations of trafficking and to referee victims of trafficking to proper services. So in our work, it has been important to clearly clarify to the people we collaborated, that identifying and reporting situations of trafficking by them, is not just a moral obligation but is their legal obligation.

Together with our collaborators we identify dysfunctional families and persons in risk of trafficking in the area. In order to avoid the risks of exposure to traffickers, we present ourselves in the community as social workers with a focus on the employment and vocational training of youth people. When we identify someone as potential victim of trafficking we referee the person for assistance. In many cases even when the person is being exploited still he/she find it difficult to trust or refuse to be helped. In these cases, we still try to follow the situation of the person being exploited, in order to give again our help when the person exploited will be ready to accept help.

Sometimes, trying to contact potential victims of trafficking, we found ourselves in great risks because of the vicinity of the trafficker. In those cases, when the victim is under the direct control of the trafficker we referee the case to the anti-trafficking police for immediate intervention.

In the same time, besides of working directly with victims of trafficking in trying to identify and assist them, we work intensively in the community to raise awareness about the risks of trafficking. The major focus of our work in raising awareness are youth groups, or high school students, who as a target age group are more in risk of trafficking comparing to groups of other ages. Even in these cases, being that we also work in the same communities in directly identifying and referring victims of trafficking, we choose not to be exposed to large groups as people who are involved in the direct assistance of victims of trafficking because of the risks that we can occur. We present ourselves as people who works for promoting children rights, or we train some professionals that are in direct contact with them, like teachers, school psychologists, social animators, social workers that operate in the community, and then these professionals do frequent activities in raising awareness in the youth groups but also serve as connecting bridges in the cases when someone from the community is in a situation of trafficking or exploitation and needs help.

Of great help in the awareness raising work have been some materials that were used. In many schools and youth groups it was showed a photo novella named "This was my story" that tells the real story of a girl trafficked and then helped toward her difficult process of beginning again her life. The photo novella has a huge impact on the community.

Also there were some little leaflets regarding the indicators of a potential victim of trafficking. These indicators named some of the situation when someone is considered to be a potential victim of trafficking, for example, a child unaccompanied or accompanied by adults with no consanguinity, that frequent places not suitable for his/her age, or that is engaged in criminal activities and prostitution.

### **The profile of victims of trafficking in Albania**

From the cases of the girls identified and assisted, and from the field work in the community, we noticed that in many cases victims of trafficking have some mutual traits that make them more vulnerable to abuse, exploitation and trafficking. These common traits are very important to be highlighted, in order not just to identify and assist victims of trafficking but even to prevent situations of trafficking by knowing which populations are in greater risks.

#### **1) Family**

The most part of victims of human trafficking are grown up in dysfunctional families. These vulnerable families are characterized by issues of violence, poverty and lack of care. Most of the cases assisted are raised in violent families, when acts of violence have occurred frequently. In many cases there are even acts of incest by their close relatives or even their fathers. These violence issues often are related with alcoholic dependence, especially by their fathers. In many cases, families of origins of victims of trafficking are composed by stepfathers or stepmothers, or by divorced and remarried partners, with unclear boundaries of relationship. With so many overlapping dysfunctions, family is not the shelter of security, warmth and trust but paradoxically is the place of mistrust and the place to escape from.

#### **2) Age**

Another important trait of trafficking victims is their age. In many cases they are minors, or even when they are identified while there are adults, still the exploitation process began when they were minors. The earlier begin the exploitation process and the larger is the difference from the beginning of the exploitation until getting assistance, the more difficult and longer will be the reintegration process. That's why early identification or prevention of trafficking is so important.

### **3) Education**

Most of the cases of victims of trafficking in Albania have a low level of education or even total lack of education. So it's important that the social workers, child protection units, NGO-s and Social Services follow with particular attention the early school leavers in order to prevent any exploitation risk.

### **4) Employment**

Lack of employment is highly associated with poverty and as a result with trafficking and exploitation. Also some kinds of employment are highly associated with exploitation situation. For example in Albania there is a new trend of exploitation through the night clubs. In some -night clubs, there are recruited girls of ages between 17-24, that first works as waitresses or belly dancers and then are used for sexual exploitation.

### **5) Ethnicity and Region**

In Albania, women and children that belong to Roma and Egyptian community tend to be in greater risk of exploitation and trafficking. These communities face problems of discrimination, social exclusion, and difficulties in gaining public services. They find difficulties in finding suitable jobs and usually are engaged in hard and low paid jobs. Also their families are composed by numerous children and they live in an extreme poverty. Their children left school in an early age, and are involved in begging or early hard works. As a result of this, they are more vulnerable to various form of exploitation either by their parents or by third persons who use their vulnerability.

Also trafficking and exploitation is more present in regions in Albania where there is lack of employment and poverty, especially in the overcrowded and informal suburban areas of the big cities of Albania.

### **Some Recommendations**

Some of the recommendations in order to prevent human trafficking, but also to identify and assist victims of trafficking, may be seen in the following paragraphs:

Identifying dysfunctional families in the communities as one of the primary causes of exploitation and trafficking. Trying to assist these families and the members of these families, before these dysfunctions brings irrevocable consequences, like exploitation and trafficking;

Increasing identification capacities regarding indicators of trafficking, for professionals in the communities who work with vulnerable target groups or with minors. In this way there will be many sources in the communities who can be aware of situation of potential trafficking;

- Mapping the areas where trafficking is more frequent and also identify the groups that are in higher risks of trafficking;
- Find out ways and methods of recruitment and aware and educate young people and vulnerable groups regarding this methods of recruitment;
- Good coordination between social services, police and education system in order to response in an adapt way to situation of trafficking and referee the victim to proper services as fast as possible.