

TRAFFICKED BY SOMEONE I KNOW

A qualitative study of the relationships between trafficking
victims and human traffickers in Albania



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This document was prepared in the framework of the programme “*Transforming National Response to Human Trafficking in and from Albania*”, implemented by a coalition of six international and local organisations: UNICEF Albania, Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe Presence in Albania, Terre des Hommes, Tjeter Vizion, Vatra and Të Ndryshëm dhe të Barabartë. The programme is funded by the government of the United Kingdom (UK).

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Suggested Citation of the Report:

Davy, D., (2022) “*Trafficked by someone I know: A qualitative study of the relationships between trafficking victims and human traffickers in Albania*”, UNICEF Albania & IDRA.

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May 2022



Acknowledgements

The author extends gratitude to Elda Denaj and David Gvineria, and other members of the UNICEF team, namely Edina Kozma, Ornela Palushaj, Sonila Pema and Phenny Kakama for their support in the process of developing this report. The author also acknowledges the efforts of IDRA Research & Consulting personnel who conducted the interviews and focus group discussions with key informants.

Sincere thanks go to reference group members who, under the leadership of H. E. Duncan Norman, at the time British Ambassador to Albania, Dr Roberto De Bernardi, UNICEF Albania Representative, and Mrs Silvana Banushi, General Director, Ministry of Interior, guided the study process from its onset.

The author further extends her gratitude to Mrs Harriet Morgan, Justice and Home Affairs Officer, British Embassy Tirana, Ms Erjola Foto, Programme Manager for Modern Slavery, British Embassy Tirana, and Ms. Frances Godfrey, at the time Head of Countering Exploitation Programme, Home Office.

Special gratitude goes to the case managers who conducted the interviews with survivors for this study.

Finally, and most importantly, the author thanks the survivors who shared their very personal stories of exploitation at the hand of someone to whom they were close. It is hoped that this report reflects their courage and resilience.

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List of acronyms

EU	European Union
FGD	Focus group discussion
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UK	United Kingdom
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
US	United States

Executive summary

Introduction

Albania is significantly affected by, and remains primarily a source country for, human trafficking. Of the non-European Union (EU) trafficking victims identified in the EU, Albanians are the second largest group (after Nigerians). Among these victims, there is a high proportion of children and youth. Girls of age 14–18 years are most likely to be targeted for sex trafficking. A recent analysis of 99 human trafficking cases showed that 68 percent of traffickers were either close family members or had close social ties to the victims. Of the 99 cases, 31 percent were reported to be cases in which boyfriends had exploited victims, 25 percent were friends of the victim, and twelve percent involved family members. In 19 percent of cases victims were exploited by people they had met on social media. While we know, therefore, that Albanians are often trafficked by someone that they are close to, we lack further understanding on the ways in which traffickers recruit, exploit and control the victims who are known to them, and the effects of the relationships upon the victims’ escape and vulnerability to re-trafficking. The present study aims to address these knowledge gaps.

Aim and objectives

The central aim of this study was to strengthen the understanding of the relationships between human trafficking victims and human traffickers, and the effects of these relationships on victim recruitment, control, exploitation, escape and re-trafficking.

More specifically, the objectives were to:

- Examine the dynamics of the relationships between victims and human traffickers in the Albania context.
- Understand and document the tactics of human traffickers in the areas of victim recruitment, control and exploitation.
- Explore how relationships between victims and traffickers play an important role in victim recruitment, control and exploitation, as well as victims’ escape and vulnerability to re-trafficking.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative approach. The methods used for this study were semi-structured interviews with 30 trafficking survivors and 14 key informants, as well as focus group discussions (FGDs) with 31 representatives of government agencies and non-government organisations (NGOs).

Data collection was conducted during the period 17 May–30 July 2021.

Fourteen face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants employed in government agencies and NGOs in Albania. Ten face-to-face FGDs were also

conducted with representatives of relevant government agencies and NGOs in Albania by the research company IDRA Research & Consulting. The 31 FGD participants included police, social workers, psycho-social counsellors, child protection officers and NGO representatives.

Only trafficking survivors who met the inclusion criteria were invited to be interviewed for the study. Interviews with survivors were conducted by their case managers.

The criteria for the participants included:

- Being of age 18 years or above.
- Being trafficked Albanian nationals, including minority groups, (i.e. not nationals of foreign countries).
- At the time of interview, have been provided with support by a specialised shelter (NGO or state) for at least two months.
- Having been trafficked in the last three years.
- Having been screened by their case manager as being able to answer the interview questions without this causing them significant distress.
- Having been trafficked by someone that they have a close connection to (e.g., a family member, intimate partner, friend, neighbour or employer).

Of the 30 interviewed survivors, 27 (90%) were female and three (10%), male. Fourteen (47%) of the interviewed survivors were children at the time of their exploitation. Four (13%) of the survivors identified themselves as belonging to ethnic minorities (Roma and Egyptian) while the other 26 (87%) identified themselves as ethnic Albanian.

Of the survivors, 23 (77%) had been trafficked domestically (i.e. in Albania), usually to major urban centres such as Tirana, and two (7%) had been trafficked previously. Of the survivors, 23 (77%) had been trafficked for sexual exploitation and seven (23%) for forced labour, including criminal activities and begging.

Findings

Relationships between victims and traffickers

The study identified that most of the interviewed trafficking survivors (n=14; 47%) had been trafficked by an intimate partner (boyfriend, fiancé, husband). Eight survivors (27%) reported that their trafficker(s) were friend(s). Four survivors (10%) identified family members—parent(s) or grand-parent(s)—as their trafficker(s). Thus, 84 percent of the survivors had been trafficked by someone who was very close to them. Other traffickers that were identified were employers (n=2; 7%), landlords (n=1; 3%) and the intimate partner of a sibling (n=1; 3%).

Profiles of traffickers

Twenty-three of the 30 interviewed survivors (77%) identified their trafficker(s) as male, and five (16.5%) that their trafficker(s) was female. In all five cases, the female trafficker(s) were a friend or friends of the victim.

The interviewed survivors suggested that their traffickers had only received limited education. Only five interviewed survivors (16.5%) reported that their trafficker(s) were employed at the time of their exploitation.

Many interviewed female survivors trafficked by an intimate partner reported that they had met their partner (trafficker) in their local area.

Fourteen interviewed survivors (47%) reported that their trafficker(s) were operating in small or medium-sized organised crime groups, twelve (40%) that their traffickers had exploited other victims, six (20%) that their traffickers were also engaged in drug trafficking, and three (10%) that their traffickers were also engaged in theft or robbery. Four survivors (13%) reported that, in addition to human trafficking offences, their traffickers also engaged in drug trafficking and theft or robbery.

Motivations of traffickers

All interviewed survivors reported their trafficker(s)' primary motivation for trafficking was financial gain. According to them, the traffickers were either very wealthy, or very poor. Those described as wealthy were also reported as engaged in other criminal activities. Those described as poor were also often described as having debts accrued through gambling or alcohol or drug addiction, which they attempted to repay through the exploitation of victims.

Recruitment tactics

The present study identifies a number of novel tactics used by human traffickers to recruit potential victims. Currently, human traffickers in Albania carefully assess their potential victims in terms of vulnerabilities and desires, in order to establish the best approach for grooming them. Traffickers also make efforts to groom the victim's family by inserting themselves into the life of the victim and earning the family's trust. Traffickers, especially young males, establish romantic relationships with sex trafficking victims (especially teenage girls), promising the victims marriage and children together. The report clearly highlights that one indicator of human trafficking in Albania today is the rushed nature of a romantic relationship. Traffickers quickly insert themselves into the life of the victim and their family, and then swiftly relocate them to another city or abroad. Social media are increasingly being used as a tool by male traffickers to identify potential young female victims with whom they can establish a false relationship before trafficking the women and girls for sexual exploitation in Albania or elsewhere. Female perpetrators play key roles in human trafficking offences: they act as the victim's friend, but then lure them to the place of exploitation. Many female perpetrators are former trafficking victims themselves. For children who are trafficked by family members, recruitment tactics are not used but, rather, the notion of the child's responsibility to financially support the family is manipulated in order to force children into exploitative labour.

Control tactics

Some of the control tactics identified in the study are those that have been identified previously in the literature on human trafficking. Traffickers use the control tactics of threat, violence, confinement and confiscation of identity and travel documents and mobile phone, to control their victims. In addition, they may keep the victims compliant through regularly drugging. The study uncovers some novel and important new findings with regard to

traffickers' control tactics. Known to the victim, the trafficker can manipulate them more easily (than those who are not known by their victims) through artificial debts and threats. Because the victim believes that they are in a relationship, or are close friends, with the trafficker, they comply when told that they have to service an artificial debt. Victims who know their trafficker are also easily controlled through threats against the victim's family members because the victim knows that their trafficker is aware of their vulnerabilities, and has the address and other personal details of the family members. Traffickers known by the victim can also easily control them by separating them from their family. For example, traffickers can create friction between the victim and their family members, and, later on, make the victim contact their family to tell them that they have moved abroad with their intimate partner or friend (trafficker) and wish to cut off contact with their family. This leaves the victim feeling that they have no family support, and thus nowhere to go and no one to help them. For interview participants who were trafficked when they were children, there was limited understanding when they were young that they were being exploited. The traffickers (often family members) simply exploited this lack of knowledge and understanding to keep the children obedient. Persistent threats of the child being forced to live on the street have a strong effect and prevent the child from fleeing situations of exploitation and abuse.

This study further identifies that there is a rapid escalation in control methods used by traffickers who are known to the victims. In the early stage of the victim's exploitation the trafficker appears to prefer subtler control methods, such as artificial debts and threats. However, when those preferred control tactics are no longer effective the trafficker adopts more forceful tactics, such as the use of violence, drugs and confinement of the victim to the place of exploitation.

Effect of relationships on victims' escape

The study found that victims who are trafficked by someone that they know may delay attempting to escape because of feelings of obligation, love and affection towards their trafficker(s). For child victims, the sense of obligation to family plays a very important part in reluctance to escape exploitation. Victims who are trafficked by an intimate partner experience disbelief that they have been exploited by someone that they love. They may delay any attempt at escape because they hope that the exploitation will cease and their relationship with their trafficker will return to how it had been previously.

Role of relationships in victims' vulnerability to re-trafficking

The study identified that relationships between victims and traffickers can have a negative effect on victims' vulnerability to re-trafficking by the same perpetrator. Children who are trafficked by family members, and victims who are trafficked by an intimate partner, appear to be at a heightened risk of re-trafficking by the same perpetrator. However, through comprehensive support services, victims can recover from their trauma and make a decision to cut off all contact with the trafficker, thus reducing their vulnerability to re-trafficking.

Trafficker Profile

Male trafficker 1

Pretends to be in a relationship with a victim but traffics them for sexual exploitation and typically:

- Has been exploiting multiple victims over a long period
- Traffics women and girls in order to accumulate wealth for himself
- Is only slightly older than the victim
- Has a low level of education
- Is often involved in other criminal activities (e.g., drug trafficking, burglary, theft, rape)
- Often has a record of arrests in Albania and other countries
- Often is connected to organized crime groups
- Selects good looking young Albanian women and girls with little education
- Approaches their victim on social media, or recruits them in their local area
- Pretends to be employed and wealthy
- May lie to the victim about having a wife and children
- Pretends to be in love with the victim; promises marriage and children together
- Conducts a hurried relationship, inserting himself into the victim's family and gaining their trust
- Promises employment or adventure in a different city in Albania or abroad, to where they rush the victim.

When in a different city or abroad:

- Pretends to have significant debt
- Invents friction between the victim and their family in order to reduce contact
- May use blackmail (e.g., threatening to post videos of the victim's sexual activities online)
- May threaten to traffic the victim's siblings
- May use traditional control tactics, such as violence and confinement.

Male trafficker 2

Family member who traffics children for labour or sexual exploitation, or both and typically:

- Is likely exploiting only one or two family members (usually children)
- Traffics family members in order to pay off existing debts
- Is significantly older than the victim
- Has a low level of education
- Is often unemployed
- Is likely unconnected to organized crime groups, but may collaborate with other perpetrators (e.g., child sex offenders)
- Has significant debt from alcohol or substance abuse or gambling (or any combination of those)
- May use threats of violence or homelessness.

Female trafficker

- Likely recruits multiple victims
- Recruits victims in order to generate income
- Is of a similar age to the victim
- Has a low level of education
- Is unemployed
- Is herself a former sex trafficking victim
- Is often connected to organized crime groups
- Recruits victims through the local community, as well as social media
- Pretends to be the victim's friend
- Promises employment, financial gain, or adventure
- Purchases items, alcohol, hotel stays for the victim
- Invents artificial debts (linked to the purchase of items, etc.)
- May use traditional control tactics, such as violence and confinement.



Way forward

The study identifies several key areas for future intervention. In the area of trafficking prevention, children and youth in Albania need to be educated about human trafficking, recruitment methods (especially education on the role of social media), persons who might be a trafficker, where they can go to seek help and access protection and support services, and on children's rights to support services. This awareness needs to start at a young age.

Prevention efforts that target young Albanian youth (male and female) may reduce the risk of offending. The study found that young Albanian males and females play key roles in human trafficking offences. Through secondary-school education on the indicators of human trafficking, awareness of the damage human trafficking causes to victims and the stringent penalties for conviction, youth may be deterred from offending in the future.

Education programmes should be introduced or expanded in Albania that strengthen parents' ability to talk to their children about sexual health, sexual violence and abuse, and healthy relationships.

Public health and education professionals should develop education programmes to support parents in speaking to their children about relationships, healthy or otherwise. This may improve the ability of young Albanians to identify a negative and exploitative relationship when they are in one, and strengthen parents' ability to intervene when they suspect that their child is being groomed for exploitation. This may also encourage families to seek assistance when they are concerned that their child is at risk of trafficking or has been trafficked, and may also reduce the stigma attached to human trafficking.

Increased effort needs to be made by relevant government agencies and NGOs to identify families experiencing poverty, debt, substance abuse or violence, and provide these families with socio-economic support.

Early intervention and provision of socio-economic support to struggling families will reduce the likelihood that parents will take the decision to traffic their children, and will also support victims who have been exploited by family members to escape exploitation.

To reduce the risk of re-trafficking, there is a need for increased provision of immediate and long-term specialised care, especially for children and youth who have been trafficked.

Such specialised care includes comprehensive and child-friendly services, including mental health care, health care, education, access to free legal aid and, for youth, access to livelihood skills training and paid internships or job placement.

All key stakeholders and duty-bearers need to strengthen their efforts to combat organised crime in Albania. Relevant entities should continue to strengthen the fight against human trafficking by further progressing towards establishing a solid track record of investigation and prosecution of human trafficking cases.

A coordinated response from all agencies—government and non-government—that are involved in crime prevention and victim protection activities, should be prioritised.

While this study addresses important knowledge gaps, future studies could explore the following areas: the recruitment and control tactics used by human traffickers with male, as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) victims; social media as a tool for identifying and grooming victims; female perpetrators in human trafficking crimes; the links between human trafficking and other forms of serious organised crime in Albania; and the motivations and activities of human traffickers identified through interviews with them. Future studies could consider adopting the same victim-centred approach that was applied in the current study.



Section 1: Introduction

Albania is a source, transit, and destination country for human trafficking but remains primarily a source country for human trafficking.¹ While the true volume of domestic and international trafficking of Albanian nationals remains unknown, the United States (US) Department of State 2021 Trafficking in Persons report refers to 81 potential victims, and five officially recognised victims in the 2020 reporting year.² Among non-EU trafficking victims identified in the EU, Albanians are the second largest group (after Nigerians), with the 2018 Report of the European Commission reporting more than 1,300 Albanian victims of the phenomenon in Europe.³ Albanians are trafficked to Italy and Greece, but also other destinations including the United Kingdom (UK), Sweden, Germany and Switzerland. Albanian men, women, girls and boys are trafficked for labour or sexual exploitation, or both, in these, and other, destination countries.⁴ In the past decade, domestic trafficking has become a more significant phenomenon in Albania than cross-border trafficking.⁵

The existing literature suggests that, among trafficking victims, **there is a high proportion of children and youth.**⁶ Among child victims, **girls of age 14–18 years are most likely to be targeted for sex trafficking.**⁷ Although they are less likely object of studies and research, **men and boys are also trafficked**, within Albania and to foreign countries. The ethnic composition of male victims has changed over time: previously, most identified male trafficking victims were Roma or Egyptian, but in more recent years, ethnic Albanian males have been identified.⁸

The drivers of human trafficking in Albania are broad, multiple and often overlapping. A number of vulnerability factors come into play in human trafficking in Albania, including **harmful social and gender norms, poverty, low levels of education, mental health issues, forced marriage arrangements, and limited options for safe and legal migration.**⁹ Other factors include discrimination against minority groups, such as Roma, who are often trafficked for sexual exploitation.¹⁰

¹ Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA), 2016, Report concerning the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on action against trafficking in human beings by Albania; United States Department of State, 2020, Trafficking in Persons Report 2020.

² United States Department of State, 2021, Trafficking in Persons Report: Albania, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report/albania/>

³ European Commission, 2018, Data collection on trafficking of human beings in the EU, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-security/20181204_data-collection-study.pdf

⁴ United States Department of State, 2021, Trafficking in Persons Report: Albania, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report/albania/>

⁵ Vatra Psycho-Social Center, 2010, Annual Report.

⁶ Puka, B., Avdulaj, E., Lepuri, G., and Corrokaj, A., 2010, The evolution of trafficking in human beings: A publication of Psycho Social Centre 'Vatra', Vlore, Albania; UK Home Office, 2020, Country policy and information note Albania: Trafficking of women for sexual exploitation.

⁷ UK Home Office, 2020, Country policy and information note Albania: Trafficking of women for sexual exploitation.

⁸ Different and Equal, 2015, Falling through the cracks! The trafficking of men and boys in Albania.

⁹ Hynes, P. et al, 2018, 'Vulnerability' to human trafficking: A study of Viet Nam, Albania, Nigeria and the UK; University of Bedfordshire and International Organisation for Migration (IOM), 2019, 'Between Two Fires': Understanding vulnerabilities and the support needs of people from Albania, Viet Nam and Nigeria who have experienced human trafficking into the UK.

¹⁰ United States Agency for International Development (USAID), 2016, Gauging public opinion on human trafficking in Moldova and Albania employing survey experimentation to inform effective prevention and awareness programs, p. 10.

Recent reports suggest that trafficking recruitment methods in Albania are varied and ever changing. In recent years, **social media has become a key recruitment tool for trafficking**, alongside traditional methods of recruitment through social ties.¹¹ Today, traffickers generally use false promises of marriage, employment, education or a better life to lure victims into exploitation.¹² Trafficking is increasingly taking place through close personal and family ties (>60%).¹³ From an analysis of 99 human trafficking cases presented by Vatra Psycho-Social Centre between 2015 and September 2017, **68 percent of traffickers were either close family members or had close social ties**. Of these, 31 percent were reported to be cases in which ‘boyfriends’ had exploited victims, 25 percent were friends and other people known to the victim, and twelve percent were related to the family. In 19 percent of cases victims were exploited by people that they had met on Facebook. Only thirteen percent of cases involved a human trafficker who was not known to the victim. Despite the evidence that in the majority of cases, traffickers are someone who is known to the victim,¹⁴ a 2021 study by UNICEF Albania found that **43 percent of surveyed Albanian youth were unaware that traffickers can be family members**.¹⁵

While the existing literature shows that there are close social ties involved in human trafficking offences in Albania, there remain important gaps in knowledge that this study seeks to address. While we know that most Albanian victims are trafficked by someone they know, due to the sensitivities associated with interviewing trafficking victims, we lack the victims’ perspectives on the dynamics of their relationships with the trafficker, whether and how the relationship between the victim and the trafficker played an important role in the victim’s recruitment, control and exploitation, whether and how the relationship with the trafficker inhibited escape or rescue, and whether and how relationships with traffickers may make victims vulnerable to re-trafficking. The literature has been unable to provide the perspectives of the trafficker due to the difficulties in interviewing them. Thus, we lack knowledge of the reasons why family members, intimate partners, friends and other individuals known to the victim traffic people.

The present study addresses important knowledge gaps and represents one of the first efforts, internationally, to explore the subject of the relationships between human traffickers and victims, and how relationships affect various aspects of the human trafficking process. Improving our understanding of the dynamics of the relationships between victims and traffickers in Albania, and how relationships influence methods of recruitment and control, will equip government agencies, international organisations and NGOs in Albania with important information for strengthening the prevention of human trafficking.

¹¹ Hynes, P. et al, 2018, ‘Vulnerability’ to human trafficking: A study of Viet Nam, Albania, Nigeria and the UK, p. 7; UK Home Office, 2020, Country policy and information note Albania: Trafficking of women for sexual exploitation.

¹² United States Department of State, 2020, Trafficking in Persons Report 2020: Albania, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-trafficking-in-persons-report/albania/>

¹³ Hynes, P. et al, 2018, ‘Vulnerability’ to human trafficking: A study of Viet Nam, Albania, Nigeria and the UK, p. 7; UK Home Office, 2020, Country policy and information note Albania: Trafficking of women for sexual exploitation.

¹⁴ Hynes, P. et al, 2018, ‘Vulnerability’ to human trafficking: A study of Viet Nam, Albania, Nigeria and the UK, p. 7.

¹⁵ See Davy, D., and Metanji, B., 2020, First Wave Survey Study on Youth Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices with Regard to Human Trafficking, in Four Regions in Albania. Report on Findings. UNICEF Albania, UK Home Office, IDRA, <https://www.unicef.org/albania/media/3616/file/First%20Wave%20Survey%20Study%20on%20Youth%20Knowledge.pdf>

The report is structured as follows:

Section 2 presents the aim and objectives of the study,

Section 3 explains the methodology,

Section 4 discusses the limitations of the study,

Section 5 reports the findings, exploring the relationships between the trafficking victims and the traffickers in Albania, the profiles of traffickers, their motivations, recruitment tactics, control tactics, effects of relationships on the victims' escape, and their role in victims' vulnerability to re-trafficking.

Section 6 provides conclusions summarising the key findings of the present study and provides some suggestions for future trafficking prevention and protection, as well as prosecution activities and future research.

Section 2: Study aim and objectives

The central aim of the present study was to strengthen the understanding of the relationships between human trafficking victims¹⁶ (domestic and cross-border trafficking of children¹⁷ and adults) and human traffickers, and the effects of these relationships on victim recruitment, control, exploitation, escape and re-trafficking.

More specifically, the objectives of the study were to:

- Examine the dynamics of the relationships between victims and human traffickers in the Albania context.
- Understand and document the tactics of human traffickers in the areas of victim recruitment, control and exploitation.
- Explore how relationships between victims and traffickers play an important role in victim recruitment, control and exploitation, as well as in their escape and vulnerability to re-trafficking.

In line with the above-mentioned objectives, the study aimed to answer the following questions:

- What are the dynamics of the relationships between human trafficking victims and human traffickers in Albania?
- What tactics do human traffickers use to recruit and control Albanian victims?
- How do the relationships between victims and traffickers affect victim recruitment, control and exploitation, and their escape and vulnerability to re-trafficking?

The study has a forward-looking perspective in terms of identifying key areas for future intervention in human trafficking prevention and victim protection. The study also aims to **identify persistent gaps in knowledge that can be addressed through future studies.**

The study's aim and objectives were informed by a literature review, which was conducted in the study design phase. The lead researcher collected and reviewed the limited body of recent academic and grey literature on the subject of human trafficking in Albania, particularly that on the traffickers and their methods of recruiting and controlling victims. The study aim and its objectives were further refined at the inception phase through a series of consultations with relevant stakeholders, including UNICEF Albania staff, several national anti-trafficking NGOs, a national anti-trafficking expert, the research company that undertook the interviews and the study Reference Group, which engages the national governmental anti-trafficking entity.

¹⁶ In this report the term 'victims' encompasses both potential victims, and victims who have been formally identified (by, for example, law enforcement) as human trafficking victims. The use of the term in this report does not suggest that an individual has any particular legal status as a victim of human trafficking. It should further be noted that the report sometimes uses the term 'survivors' when referring to persons who were trafficked, to acknowledge the strength required to overcome victimisation.

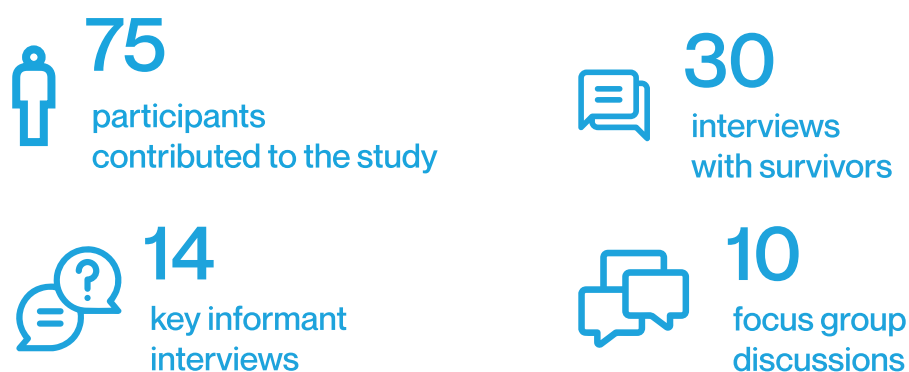
¹⁷ In this report, children refer to individuals under the age of 18 years, as outlined in Albania's Law on Child Rights and Protection 18/2017.

Section 3: Methodology

Methodological approach

The study adopted a qualitative approach. The lead researcher, in consultation with UNICEF Albania and the various stakeholders mentioned above, agreed that a qualitative approach was the most appropriate for enabling an in-depth exploration of the relationships between human traffickers and their victims, and the effects of the relationships on victim recruitment, control and exploitation, and victims' escape and vulnerability to re-trafficking. Semi-structured interviews with human trafficking survivors and key informants employed in government agencies and NGOs in Albania would have allowed for the collection of in-depth narratives and rich data for use in the analysis and report writing.

Methods



The qualitative methods adopted for this study were semi-structured interviews with trafficking survivors, and key informants, as well as FGDs. These different data sources served to complement and triangulate the findings from the different datasets. Only trafficking survivors who met the inclusion criteria (see the following section) were invited to be interviewed for the present study. Convenience sampling¹⁸ and snowballing approaches were used to recruit key informant interview and FGD participants.

All data collection was conducted during the period 17 May to 30 July 2021. It should be noted that all interviews and FGDs were conducted face-to-face during the summer, when there were few COVID-19 cases. Prior to commencement of data collection the research team monitored the COVID-19 situation carefully, and data collection only commenced when the team agreed that it was safe, for both study participants and interviewers, to conduct interviews and FGDs.

¹⁸ Convenience sampling is a type of non-probability sampling in which people are included in a study simply because they are 'convenient' sources of data. In the case of this study, key informants who could answer the interview questions, and all survivors who met the inclusion criteria, were invited to participate in the study.

Semi-structured interviews with trafficking survivors

The process of organising and conducting interviews with trafficking survivors was performed following a victim-centred approach. All measures were taken to ensure, inter alia, that survivors received a full explanation of the study from the shelter that supports them, that they understood the interview questions and the reasons for asking them, how their data would be used, and that their case manager would ask the questions. It was thought that the survivors would feel much more comfortable and safer telling their trafficking story to their case manager rather than to someone they did not know. Prior to the first interviews with survivors, the case managers participated in a half-day training session with the lead researcher and UNICEF Albania.¹⁹

Criteria were applied for the recruitment and participation of trafficking survivors in interviews for this study.

Criteria for participation:

- 18 years old or older;
- trafficked Albanian nationals (including minority groups; i.e. not nationals of foreign countries);
- at the time of interview, have been provided with support by a specialised shelter (NGO or state) for at least two months;
- trafficked in the last three years;²⁰
- screened by their case manager as being able to answer the questions without them being caused significant distress;
- trafficked by someone that they have a close connection to (e.g., a family member, intimate partner, friend, neighbour or employer).

Only those survivors who met all the inclusion criteria were approached by their case manager for participation in the study.

The survivor interview questions were reviewed by all stakeholders²¹ at the study inception phase. Shelter staff, including the case managers, reviewed and provided comments on the questions (translated into Albanian). The questions were again revised following the first two interviews held with trafficking survivors.

The purpose of interviewing trafficking survivors was to explore from their perspective the dynamics of the relationships between themselves and the traffickers, and their thoughts on how the relationships played a role in their recruitment, control, exploitation, escape and

¹⁹ For further information see the report section on ethical processes.

²⁰ The decision to include only survivors who were exploited in the previous three years is based upon the period of support that the NGOs provide. NGO reintegration support is usually for a period up to three years, after which survivors are often 'exited' from the reintegration programme. Locating survivors once they have exited the support mechanism is often very difficult. Moreover, as it was decided that the shelter case managers would conduct the interviews, the safest and most appropriate setting for the survivor interviews was the shelters.

²¹ UNICEF Albania staff, several national anti-trafficking NGOs, including case managers, a national anti-human trafficking expert, the research company IDRA, and the study Reference Group.

vulnerability to re-trafficking. The interviews aimed to allow the survivors to tell their story as they wished, with them being prompted by questions from their case manager to guide the telling of the story. The interviews were conducted in Albanian.

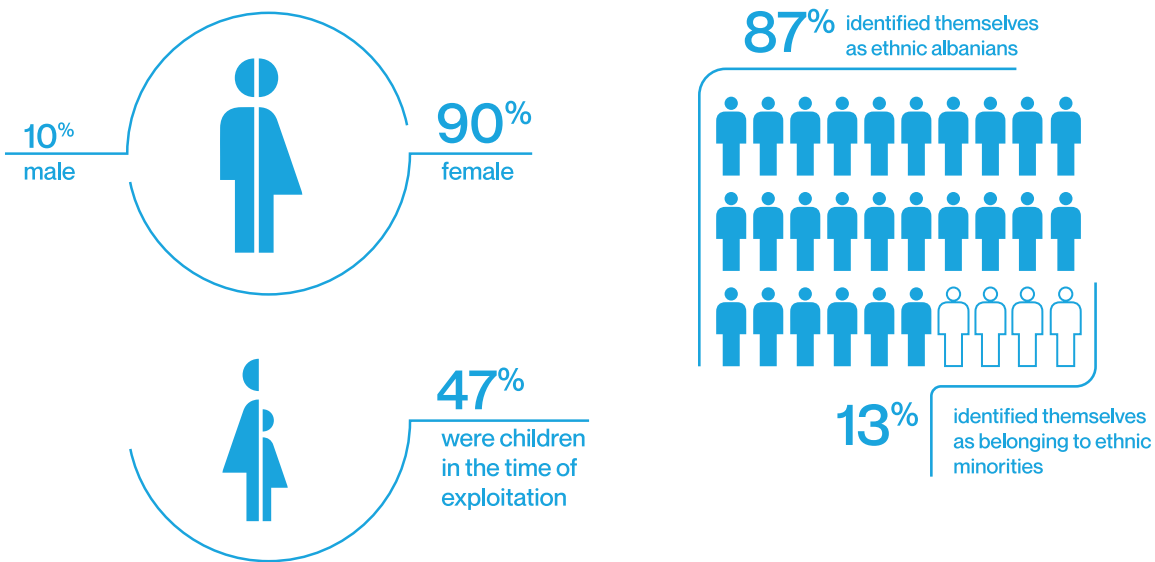
Following completion of each interview audio-files and interview notes were saved securely on a password-protected computer in each shelter. The case manager was responsible for typing up the interview notes, transcribing the interviews and removing any identifying information (e.g. survivor's name, address, company name, trafficker names) and checking the transcripts for accuracy.

Thirty-one face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with trafficking survivors. During data analysis, it was clear to the lead researcher that one survivor had been trafficked by someone that they did not have a close connection with.²² That interview was determined to have not met the inclusion criteria and was thus deleted. Thus, in all, 30 semi-structured interview transcripts were analysed for the study.

²² The participant victim had been trafficked by someone that they had met on social media, but never met face-to-face.

Profile of survivor interview participants

The details of the participants are displayed below:



Semi-structured interviews with key informants

Fourteen face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants employed in government agencies and NGOs in Albania, with four conducted with child protection officers, seven with law enforcement personnel, and three with prosecutors. The interviews were conducted by a qualified and experienced Albanian researcher employed by the research company.

The purpose of these interviews was to explore, from the perspective of the agencies that provide direct support to trafficking victims or investigate and prosecute human trafficking offences, the various effects of the relationships between victims and traffickers on victim recruitment, control, exploitation and escape. The interviews with key informants were further used to triangulate the findings from the interviews with survivors.

The key informant interview questions were tested on a small group of key informants, and changes made to the questionnaires, prior to the interviews being conducted with the rest of the group.

Following completion of each interview, the interviewer was responsible for transcribing the interview before securely forwarding the transcripts to UNICEF Albania for the purpose of translation by a company UNICEF Albania had previously used, and vetted, for translation of sensitive documents.

Focus group discussions

Ten face-to-face FGDs were also conducted with representatives of relevant government agencies and NGOs in Albania by the research company. **The 31 FGD participants included police, social workers, psycho-social counsellors, child protection officers and NGO representatives.** There was no intentional geographical distribution of the FGDs, which were coordinated by the same researcher who conducted the key informant interviews. The FGDs were conducted in Albanian, transcribed by the coordinator and translated into English for the purpose of data analysis by the lead researcher.

Data analysis

Interview and FGD transcripts were entered into qualitative data analysis computer software package NVivo 12 (QSR International), and thematic analysis performed to identify themes and patterns in survivor and key informant responses to the interview and FGD questions. Initial themes appearing in the analysis were used to develop 'codes'. As the analysis proceeded, new categories emerging from the data led to the development of additional codes. All material was analysed in this way and then subsequently re-read and re-analysed in order to complete data interpretation and analysis.

An Excel file was used to manually collate key information on the survivors (age, gender, relationship to the trafficker) and on the traffickers (age, gender, employment status, whether

they worked in a criminal network). Simple tabulations were created to report, for example, the number of survivors trafficked as children versus the number trafficked as adults, reported sector of exploitation, relationships between the victim and trafficker, among others.

Ethical processes

Prior to the commencement of data collection, the study received approval from a recognised ethics review board: Health Media Lab Ltd.²³

Prior to data collection, a half-day training session was conducted with the interviewers (case managers), where guidance was provided by the lead researcher and UNICEF Albania on the processes for identifying survivors who met the inclusion criteria, recruiting survivors for interview, informed consent, interview, and dealing with potential distress for participants, ensuring survivor confidentiality and the secure transfer of audio-files and interview transcripts to UNICEF Albania.

Confidentiality of survivors was upheld throughout the study, from identification of potential survivor interview participants, to transcribing interviews and securely transferring interview audio-files to UNICEF Albania. This was largely achieved through the development of codes to protect the identify of interviewed survivors. The shelters developed a code for each individual survivor who agreed to participate in an interview. Through the use of the codes, very few people in the shelter could get to know which survivors had participated in the study, and no one outside the shelter (including the lead researcher and UNICEF Albania) would know the names or other personal details of the survivors who had participated in the interviews.

An informed consent process preceded the interviews with survivors, each of whom was informed, prior to interview, of the purpose of the study and the types of questions they would be asked. This information was provided through a written informed consent document (in Albanian), and verbally explained to each survivor by their case manager. Each survivor was told that their case manager would ask the interview questions, and that a psychologist would be on standby to support them during and after the interview. It was further explained that they could decline to participate in the interview, stop it at any time and request at any point prior to report publication that their data be deleted, without any consequence to them.

An informed consent process was also conducted for all key informant interviews and FGDs. All key informant and FGD participants were provided with a written informed consent document in Albanian that explained the purpose of the study, how their data would be used, the principle of anonymity and that they could stop the interview at any time or request that their data be deleted.

²³ See <https://www.healthmedialabirb.com/>

Section 4: Limitations

Defining the relationship between victim and trafficker

As this study is ground-breaking and has not been attempted previously, either in Albania or elsewhere, the lead researcher, in consultation with UNICEF Albania and other stakeholders, decided to not adopt a strict definition of what constitutes a relationship between trafficking victim and trafficker. However, this led to some confusion among NGOs tasked with identifying survivors in their care who had met the inclusion criteria in order to invite them to participate in an interview. As mentioned above, one interview was conducted with a survivor who had not met their trafficker. This interview was removed from the data sample as the lead researcher determined that the survivor did not have a relationship as such with their trafficker.

Future research into the relationship between trafficking victim and trafficker could establish a definition of what the term means, which may help in terms of recruiting potential interview participants, and may be further useful in guiding future research into the subject of relationships in human trafficking cases.

Few male survivors agreed to be interviewed for the present study

Only three male survivors met the inclusion criteria and agreed to be interviewed for the study. There are several possible reasons for such a small number: most identified trafficking victims in Albania are female,²⁴ not all shelters in Albania support male trafficking survivors, and, from the lead researcher's experience in conducting similar studies involving trafficking survivors, fewer males than females are interested in participating in such studies.

The implication of such a small representation of male survivors is that the study lacks a balanced voice in terms of gender. On the one hand, the three interviews with males provided rich qualitative data on the dynamics of their relationships with their traffickers and how the relationships affected their recruitment, control, exploitation and escape. On the other hand, the study was unable to explore much further any trends in these effects. Future studies should consider the important question of how male victims (adults and children) are recruited and controlled by traffickers known to them. In light of emerging international evidence regarding the trafficking of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender victims,²⁵ future studies should also explore the narratives of LGBT individuals.

No trafficked children were interviewed

No trafficked children under the age of 18 years were interviewed for the present study. At the inception phase the research team agreed that case managers would conduct interviews with survivors at the shelters where the survivors were accommodated at the

²⁴ See US Department of State, 2021, Trafficking in persons report: Albania: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report/albania/>. Most identified trafficking victims around the world are female (see, for example, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) annual reports on trafficking in persons). It is thought that this is because police are more familiar with identifying victims of sex trafficking (who are often female) than labour trafficking, and because of the distorted notion that males cannot be victims of trafficking.

²⁵ See, for example, Martinez, O., 2013, Sex trafficking of LGBT individuals. *International Law News*, 42(4): <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4204396/>

time of interview, and provided with support services. Ethical interview processes with children require that a parent or guardian provide their consent for a child to participate in such a study. This would be very difficult when the children were residing in a shelter, and their parents or guardians residing elsewhere. It was also decided in the inception phase that the interview questions might be too sensitive for children, and that they might become distressed during the interview.

While the study thus lacks the voice of children, it should be noted that fourteen of the interviewed adult survivors reported that they had been trafficked when they were children. These interviewed survivors, although their trafficking experience was, at the time of the interview, one or more years in the past, were able to recall in detail the dynamics of the relationships with their traffickers, and the methods of their recruitment, control and exploitation. As the findings section of the report will highlight, some of those adult survivors were able to recall that, as children, they were unable to understand why their family member, intimate partner or friend had trafficked them, whereas, as adults, they were able to reflect on their experience with mature eyes and a clearer understanding of what had happened to them. In this regard, the narratives of survivors who were young when they were trafficked provide valuable insights into the journeys of survivors into reintegration.

Some survivors declined to have the interview audio-recorded

A few of the trafficking survivors requested during the informed consent process that the interview not be audio-recorded. Instead, the interviewer (case manager) took notes. To ensure that details of the story were not missed, the case managers (with the informed consent of the survivors) filled in the survivor interview questionnaires based on their understanding of the survivor's story. It is important to highlight that these case manager notes are not quoted in the report.

The sample is not representative of all trafficking survivors

This study utilised a non-probability convenience sample, and only 30 interviews were conducted with survivors. Thus, the findings of the study are not generalisable to all trafficking survivors. Nonetheless, the findings are significant and, moreover, ground-breaking with regard to improving our understanding of the subject. They will be of interest and use to policymakers and practitioners working in the field of anti-human trafficking, particularly those involved in preventing trafficking, protecting victims, investigating and prosecuting trafficking offences, and developing anti-trafficking policy.

Unable to triangulate findings through interviews with traffickers

The present report presents rich findings from semi-structured interviews with survivors, and semi-structured interviews and FGDs with key informants. While these interviews provide incredibly important insights into the motivations and tactics of human traffickers—from the perspective of the victims and professionals working in the anti-trafficking field—the findings could not be triangulated through interviews with those who trafficked the victims.

As noted in the Introduction, we know little about human traffickers due to the paucity of research involving primary data collection (e.g., interviews or surveys with them). Due to

their criminal activities and desire to evade arrest and imprisonment, human traffickers are reluctant to participate in research studies. It should be noted that this study did not attempt to identify, locate or invite human traffickers to participate in interview. To do so, would have required that the survivors be asked about personal information on their traffickers. This would have had several extremely negative consequences, including that the survivors might have feared participating in the interviews at all, and be very guarded in their responses to the questions if they did so because they feared that their traffickers would learn what was said about them during interview. Most importantly, however, approaching the traffickers with the purpose of inviting them to participate in the study would have likely meant revealing to the traffickers which survivors had participated in the study and, through this published report, their likely location (e.g., a shelter in Albania).

It should be noted that the key informant interview and FGD participants included police and prosecutors who have interviewed human traffickers and are thus familiar with the traffickers' motivations and tactics. Thus, while the report lacks the voice and perspective of human traffickers, data provided through interviews with key informants, as well as survivors, provide important insights into the activities of the human traffickers, especially in cases where the victims are known to them.



Section 5: Study findings

Relationships between victims and traffickers

From the interviews with trafficking survivors, it was determined that most of the interviewed trafficking survivors (n=14; 47%) were trafficked by their partner (boyfriend, fiancé, husband). Eight survivors (27%) identified their trafficker as a friend. Only four survivors (10%) identified other family members (parents or grandparents) as their trafficker(s). Thus, 84 percent of the survivors were trafficked by someone who was very close to them. Other traffickers that the interviewed survivors reported having close connections to were employers (n=2; 7%), landlords (n=1; 3%) or the intimate partner of a sibling (n=1; 3%).

84%

trafficked by someone
very close.



47%

trafficked by
their partner.



27%

identified the
trafficker as
a friend



10%

identified other
family members

Others:
(landlord, employer,
partner of a sibling)

It should be noted that the category of ‘neighbour’ is not reported above. It was originally hypothesised by the lead researcher that ‘neighbour’ would be a distinct category of human trafficker known to the victim. However, in the context of this study, the interviewed survivors who reported that their neighbour had trafficked them also reported that this individual was considered a close friend. In the survivor narratives the trafficker (neighbour) was frequently referred to as a long-time friend from their local area; someone that they grew up with and considered a close connection. For this reason, the categories of ‘friend’ and ‘neighbour’ are merged into one in the present report.

Profiles of traffickers

In terms of the sex of the traffickers, **23 of the 30 interviewed survivors (77%) identified their trafficker as male. Of these, most (n=21) identified their trafficker as an individual male.** In most of these cases, the male trafficker was of a similar age to the victim, and was responsible for luring young Albanian women into sexual exploitation. Two interviewed survivors identified their traffickers as two males. **Five survivors (16.5%) identified their trafficker as female. Three survivors identified their perpetrator as one female,** and two that their traffickers were two females. In all five cases of female traffickers, these were friends of the victim. This challenges the notion that human traffickers are always, or at least almost always, male.

Two survivors (6.5%) identified their traffickers as of different sexes, with at least one male, and one female perpetrator.

With regard to the education level of the traffickers, the survivors suggested that their **traffickers had received only limited education.** This finding is supported by the interviews and FGDs with key informants, who suggested that traffickers generally **have limited education, especially higher education, and few decent employment options.** This may explain, at least in part, why some individuals decide to engage in criminal activities such as human trafficking.



“Traffickers are usually young and come from structured groups. They usually lack education and intend on exploiting other people. However, human trafficking is not their only activity: they are also involved in trafficking narcotics. This is the general profile of a trafficker.”
(FGD participant)

With regard to the age of the traffickers, **all interviewed survivors (n=30) reported that their trafficker was older than themselves,** and significantly so where the trafficker was a parent or grandparent. Survivors who were trafficked by employers or landlords also noted that their traffickers were significantly older than themselves. However, victims who were trafficked by an intimate partner were usually of a similar age, with the male trafficker usually being only 1–15 years older than the victim. Where victims had been trafficked by friends, the traffickers were also youth, usually only a few years older than the victim.

Regarding the geographic proximity of the traffickers to their victims, many interviewed

female survivors trafficked by an intimate partner reported that they had met their trafficker in their local area, suggesting that trafficking in Albania is often localised. **Traffickers prey on vulnerable women and girls in their neighbourhood, due to their geographic proximity and ease at which they can recruit and groom their potential victims.** Similarly, victims trafficked by friends also reported meeting their traffickers in their immediate vicinity, often through networks of friends or family. Most of the interviewed survivors who had been trafficked by friend(s) had grown up in the same neighbourhood as their trafficker and considered them as close friends.

In terms of the traffickers' background, many of the interviewed survivors had limited knowledge of their traffickers' upbringing, marital status or employment status. Some survivors, especially those who were trafficked by male intimate partners, reported that they found out only later (after escape or rescue) that their trafficker was older than he said he was, and was married with children. The interviewed survivors had not been aware that their intimate partner already had a family. In one case, the interviewed survivor reported also learning later that the wife of the trafficker was an accomplice in the victim's trafficking.



“When I went to the police station, they informed me that he was married and had two children. His wife was his accomplice. She had prepared the documents to take me overseas.”
(Female survivor)

Only five interviewed survivors (16.5%) reported that their traffickers were employed at the time of their exploitation. Traffickers' work and business activities, as reported by the interviewed survivors, included owning or operating jewellery shops or automobile shops, working in casual positions as security guards, or performing manual labour. However, some of the interviewed survivors who were trafficked by an intimate partner reported that their trafficker may have lied to them about their employment status, and that their trafficker was not, in fact, employed at all.

None of the interviewed survivors who were trafficked by family members reported that their traffickers were employed at the time of their exploitation, suggesting that household poverty plays an important role in the decision to traffic family members, including children. This highlights the importance of early intervention to identify and support families facing poverty, in order to reduce the risk of child trafficking in households facing socio-economic distress.

Interviewed survivors who reported that their traffickers were unemployed at the time of their exploitation suggested that their traffickers' income generation was derived solely from human trafficking activities, though sometimes from other criminal activities, such as drug trafficking and theft. This highlights the nexus between human trafficking and other forms of serious organised crime.

With regards to the traffickers' involvement in other criminal activities, **fourteen interviewed survivors (47%) reported that they knew, or strongly suspected, that their traffickers were operating in small or medium-sized organised crime groups.** Twelve survivors (n=40%)

reported that they knew or strongly suspected that their traffickers currently, or had previously, trafficked other victims.



“They (traffickers) see it (trafficking) as a lifestyle and choose to exploit other people. They start one romantic relationship first, and then it (human trafficking) turns into a pattern of behaviour.”
(FGD participant)

Regarding other criminal activities perpetrated by the traffickers, six survivors (20%) reported that their traffickers were also engaged in drug trafficking, and three (10%) that their traffickers were engaged in theft or robbery. Four survivors (13%) reported that, in addition to human trafficking offences, their traffickers also engaged in drug trafficking and theft or robbery. Some interviewed survivors, especially those who were trafficked by intimate partners, reported that their trafficker had a record of previous arrests for other crimes committed abroad. One interviewed survivor reported that she later became aware (after her escape) that her trafficker (intimate partner) had been previously imprisoned for attempted rape of a fourteen-year-old child. Another interviewed survivor reported that she later became aware that her trafficker (intimate partner) was using a false name because of his criminal history and attempts to evade the authorities.

In summary, these findings clearly highlight the fact that human traffickers in Albania are often involved in serious organised crime, generating significant profits not only from the exploitation of adults or children, or both, but also through theft, robbery, trafficking of drugs and other criminal activities.



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Motivations of traffickers

Across all the interviews, survivors identified their traffickers' primary **motivation for trafficking was financial gain**. The survivors described their traffickers as either very wealthy or very poor; no interviewed survivor described their trafficker as of medium level wealth. As noted in previous paragraphs, only a few of the interviewed survivors identified their traffickers as employed.

Due to the limited sample size, it is difficult to identify clear trends in trafficker motivations based on their real or perceived level of wealth (as reported by the interviewed survivors). However, some interesting patterns could be identified from the interviews with survivors regarding the criminal activities of traffickers who were considered by the survivors as wealthy. **For example, the traffickers who were described by the interviewed survivors as wealthy were also those who were engaged in other criminal activities, such as drug trafficking, as well as theft and robbery.** The survivors who identified their traffickers as wealthy and engaged in other criminal activities suggested that while the motivation of the traffickers for exploitation was clearly financial gain, their traffickers did not need to make more money as they were already very wealthy (as a result of criminal activities). These interviewed survivors suggested that their traffickers simply enjoyed committing crime, which had become an addiction, and despite the accumulation of wealth through the activity, as well as from other crimes, their traffickers had no intention of ceasing their criminal activities. In other words, their traffickers were engaged in a perpetual state of criminal activity.



*"He exploited many people for money. He was addicted to money. He'd do all kinds of evil."
(Female survivor)*

Traffickers that were described as poor were also often identified by the interviewed survivors as having debts accrued through gambling or alcohol or drug addiction, or a combination of those. According to the interviewed survivors, the victims were exploited to provide the traffickers with the money needed to pay off existing debts and pay for the traffickers' ongoing addictions. This highlights the vulnerabilities faced by children living in households that experience socio-economic issues. Households may be poor not only because of lack of income but also due to addictions and debt, and **children in households that are struggling financially may be viewed as a commodity that can be traded in order to finance debts and addictions.**

“

“He forced me to beg on the streets. We had no income since no one in my home worked. My father didn’t have a job. He was a heavy drinker. He made me beg and took all of the money; he squandered it all on alcohol.”

(Male survivor)

“

“He spent all of the money he earned from me on drugs.”

(Female survivor)



Recruitment tactics of traffickers

The interviews conducted with survivors for this study, as well as the key informant interviews and FGDs, highlighted a diverse range of tactics used by traffickers to recruit victims. Some of these recruitment tactics have already been discussed in the literature on human trafficking, while others are arguably new. The study identified that while there are many commonalities in the tactics used by traffickers to recruit victims, **recruitment tactics differ somewhat depending on the relationship between the victim and the traffickers, as well as the age of the victim.**

In the case of children trafficked by family members, the study identified that **traffickers capitalise on victims' sense of obligation to financially support the family.** In the cases of interviewed survivors who were children when they were trafficked by their parents or grandparents, the traffickers did not need to use traditional recruitment tactics. The parent or grandparent had a long-established, albeit fractured and difficult, relationship with the child, and simply instructed them to work (beg, or provide sexual services to strangers) as, purportedly, a means of financially supporting the family. In these cases the interviewed survivors reported that, as children, they felt that they had no possibility of refusing their parents' or grandparents' instructions. **At such a young age, they did not know that their situation was not normal, and that they were being exploited.** This suggests that children are extremely vulnerable to trafficking by family members because they do not understand that they are being exploited, and that interventions to raise awareness of human trafficking and other forms of exploitation, and the rights of children, should target children at a young age.



“Education should start in school. I had no idea what trafficking was. My peers didn’t know either. In my nine years of education and while living with my family, I had never heard of trafficking or sexual abuse. I think that the family has some responsibilities too: parents should advise their children on what healthy sexual intercourse is.”
(Female survivor)

The study further highlighted that **traffickers prey on the socially vulnerable and the young.** As noted above, all interviewed survivors were younger than their traffickers, and most identified that they had lived in a difficult family situation, and faced financial challenges. The present study identified that traffickers assess their potential victims in terms of the family and the economic situation, as well as their desires (i.e. study, work, romance). Having identified the victim's vulnerabilities and desires, traffickers then identify the best approach to groom the victim. The traffickers then insert themselves into the life of the victim and groom them by building affection and trust and promising them love and security or adventure and financial gain.



“They are very capable of assessing the girls psychologically. While recruiting, they are able to discern whether the girl dreams of love, or whether she is a spirited person and wishes to show off, have designer items and live a luxurious life. Thus, the exploiter is well aware of what to offer.”
(FGD participant)

The study further identified that **traffickers' recruitment activities extend to the victim's family**. Interviews with survivors who were trafficked for sexual exploitation identified that one tactic used by traffickers to gain the trust of parents is for the trafficker to appear to be altruistic and well-intentioned through the provision of financial support to the victim's family. In the cases of children who are trafficked for sexual exploitation, the trafficker will brazenly insert himself into the family circle and provide the victim's parents and siblings with gifts and money. The trafficker thus attempts to win the trust of the victim's family with cash and gifts, before moving on to grooming the child. In these cases, the trafficker usually preys on families that are poor and in desperate need of financial support.

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“

My mother wasn't thinking clearly and couldn't see what was really going on. What mattered to her was that they (the trafficker) had money and could provide for our family.”
(Female survivor)

For the interviewed survivors who were trafficked by intimate partners, **a common thread was that the trafficker established affection and trust with the victim, telling them that they love them and promising them marriage and children together.** Key informant interview and FGD participants emphasised that today, many human traffickers in Albania are young Albanian males seeking young and attractive Albanian women and girls, whom they groom by pretending to be in love with them but then proceed to exploit these women and girls sexually in Albania or abroad.



“They (traffickers) are organised and use handsome, well-dressed and eloquent boys as bait for girls to fall in love with. They instruct the girls not to talk to the police or their families for the sake of love.”
(FGD participant)



“Everything began when I met this young man. I began to get to know him, and over time, we grew closer. We began—or rather, I began—to trust him. We discussed everything, we told each other everything, we talked about our families, our relationships with them, and so on. I assumed he was telling me the truth.”
(Female survivor)

Survivor Story: Emina

Emina (pseudonym) was trafficked as an adult to a foreign country for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Her trafficker was her intimate partner (fiancé). Emina said during interview that the relationship was initially a very positive one. Her fiancé promised her that they would marry, and that she would be safe and happy.

“In the beginning, he acted like a nice guy. He was perfect; he had everything I was looking for.”

However, after a short period of time, Emina’s fiancé became very violent. He would regularly bring men to their home and force her to have sexual intercourse with them in exchange for payment, which he kept. Emina reported that she felt incredibly let down by her fiancé, and expressed disbelief that someone that she loved could exploit her.

Interviewed key informants highlighted the fact that—in most cases involving women and girls trafficked by an intimate partner—a **key indicator for human trafficking is the rushed nature of the intimate relationship.** After only several dates, the trafficker will have inserted himself into the inner circle (immediate family) of the victim, promised marriage and arranged ‘work’ for the couple in a different city or country. Because the victim believes they are in a relationship with their intimate partner, they willingly go with them to another city in Albania or abroad. This highlights the importance of increasing awareness, among youth and parents and guardians, about this key indicator (rushed nature of a relationship), as well as awareness of methods of reporting suspected human trafficking cases, and support services for vulnerable youth and adults.



“What must be noted here is the rush. They rush into getting to know the individual and being introduced to the family, and then one week later they decide to move abroad. Everything happens so fast and they pretend that they love the girl. However, as soon as the girl goes with them, they ... start pressurising.”
(FGD participant)

Traffickers who are friends of the victim, as well as some intimate partner traffickers, and employers, also adopt **the tactic of promising employment, financial gain or adventure as a means of recruitment**. This is a traditional tactic that has been discussed in the literature on human trafficking.²⁶ In this recruitment method, the friend, partner or employer suggests to the victim that they relocate to another city in Albania, or to another country, to experience travel and adventure, or to find well-paid work. In many cases the trafficker will offer to pay for the victim’s travel and accommodation costs. On arrival at the destination, the trafficker will then tell the victim that they owe the trafficker a debt for travel and other costs, and that the victim must engage in labour or sexual exploitation, or both, in order to repay this artificial debt.



“We’d been dating for about a year at that point. I was attending university at the time, so after a year of dating, he offered to take me to Germany and get me a scholarship in finance studies. I loved and believed him, and I was fascinated by the prospect of studying abroad.”
(Female survivor)

Survivor Story: Luljeta

Luljeta (pseudonym) was an adult when she was recruited by a female friend, and trafficked for forced labour and sexual exploitation abroad. Luljeta’s friend told her about a good job in a country in Europe, and put her in touch with a business owner who would employ her. On arrival in the foreign country, the business owner told Luljeta that she would be a bartender and receive a good salary. However, on her first day of work, Luljeta was taken by the trafficker to a room where she was told that she would ‘work’ (provide sexual services to clients). When Luljeta said that she did not want to stay the business owner became violent.

The study identified that **in such cases of promising employment, financial gain or adventure in order to recruit victims, there is often a female perpetrator involved**. As noted in previous pages, five interviewed survivors who were trafficked by friends reported that their recruiter was female. In all these five cases the recruitment tactic used by the female perpetrator was to promise the victim employment, financial gain or adventure. In such cases, the female recruiters insert themselves into the life of the victim, invite them to activities and events, and buy them items such as clothes. The female recruiters listen to the victim’s problems and

²⁶ See, for example, UNODC, 2020, Global report on trafficking in persons 2020, https://www.unodc.org/documents/\data-and-analysis/tip/2021/GLOTiP_2020_15jan_web.pdf

offer advice. Then after a short period of time they suggest to the victim that they pursue an adventure (work, travel, etc.) in another city or another country, thus leading the victim to a place of exploitation, and handing the victim over to a larger group of perpetrators. This case highlights the important role that female traffickers play in human trafficking networks.



“It is easier for female traffickers to recruit people because they seem more reliable, and there is always a female involved in the story.”
(FGD participant)

Key informant interview and FGD participants posited that many of these female recruiters are former trafficking victims themselves. They simply adopt the same tactics that were once used to recruit them in order to identify and groom new victims. While the study could not uncover whether these former trafficking victims became recruiters because they were forced by a criminal network to do so, it is likely that some former victims were forced to become perpetrators by organised crime networks, while others did so simply because of a lack of access to decent employment options.



“A simple analysis would show that one cannot become a recruiter without having first been trafficked. When we talked to the police, we received information on how they were trafficked and why they recruit girls now, which is for profit.”
(FGD participant)



According to the interviewed survivors, as well as key informants who participated in interviews or FGDs for this study, the traffickers often identify their victims through mutual connections. However, the study identified that for victims who are trafficked by friends or partners, social media play an important role in their initial recruitment. The use of social media as a platform for recruiting potential trafficking victims was reported as a fairly new and increasingly popular tactic. As noted by the participants, children and youth spend significant amounts of time—often unsupervised—on the Internet, and use various social media applications to meet new friends. However, these platforms are also used by traffickers to identify potential victims. Interview and FGD participants noted that, in particular, Instagram and Facebook are frequently used by traffickers in Albania to identify potential victims and commence online communication and grooming.



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Facebook and other social media have contributed to human trafficking because they are not supervised by the mother, while the father lives and works abroad and the family is in the village. Traffickers take advantage of these elements and pick girls, even at sixth grade, as long as they are physically developed. They check their social media, see their pictures and ask them out. Mothers give permission because they feel that it’s the right thing for their daughters to do, to go on a date with someone.”
(FGD participant)

The use of social media as a recruitment channel appears to be particularly popular for traffickers seeking to recruit young female Albanians for sex trafficking. The trafficker will establish a friendship with the victim through the social media application, groom them online for a period of weeks, and then continue to groom them through face-to-face contact. This highlights the need for increased education, among youth, as well as their parents or guardians, on Internet safety, especially the dangers of starting friendships and romances with people the youth meet on social media.



“Social media have turned into the main source of recruitment. Nowadays, teenage victims of trafficking tend to be recruited through social media. This has turned into one of the most modern and dangerous recruitment methods, especially for teenagers.”
(FGD participant)

In summary, the present study identifies a number of tactics used by human traffickers to recruit potential victims. With the exception of the recruitment of victims with the promise of employment, study opportunities or adventure abroad, the tactics outlined here have not, to date, been well discussed in the literature on human trafficking. Importantly, the study finds that traffickers carefully assess their potential victims in terms of their vulnerabilities and desires, in order to identify the best way in which to establish a relationship with them and subsequently to groom them. The study further identifies that traffickers consolidate their efforts to recruit a victim by inserting themselves into the life of the victim and earning the family's trust. With regard to sex trafficking specifically, the study finds that traffickers (especially young male traffickers) establish romantic relationships with the victims (especially teenage girls), promising them marriage and children together, all of which is used as a ruse to easily transfer the victim to the place of exploitation. Social media are increasingly being used as a tool by young male traffickers to identify potential young female victims with whom they can establish a false relationship before forcing them into sexual exploitation. The study also sheds valuable light on the role of female perpetrators in human trafficking offences, with female offenders frequently playing the role of the victim's friend. Through a false friendship the female perpetrators are able to easily coerce younger female victims into travelling with them to the place of exploitation, before handing over the victim to a larger group of traffickers. Many female perpetrators are themselves former trafficking victims. For child trafficking victims, the situation is different: recruitment tactics are not required by family members who traffic children as the children are easily forced into exploitative labour through feelings of obligation to their family, and guilt.

It should further be noted these tactics differentiate traffickers who have a connection with the victim from those who are strangers. The trafficker who is known to the victim can capitalise on their relationship to easily transfer the victim to a different location for exploitation. Affection and trust are easily manipulated by the trafficker who is known to the victim to coerce them into sexual or labour exploitation, or both. In the recruitment phase, force and threats are not required. Rather, affection and trust are employed to persuade the victim to do what the trafficker wants.

Control tactics of traffickers

The study found that traffickers use a variety of methods to exercise control over their victims. Some of these tactics are the same as those used by traffickers who are not known to the victims. However, some specific nuances to the tactics were identified that will be explored below. Furthermore, the study found a clear pattern of control in cases of traffickers known to the victim, commencing with subtle control tactics, quickly succeeded by more forceful tactics, being applied.



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The study identified that one tactic often used by traffickers who are known to their victims is to **geographically and psychologically separate the victims from their families**. It was highlighted above that traffickers often attempt to win the affection of the victim’s family at the recruitment stage. Once recruitment is completed and the victim has been transferred

to the place of exploitation, the trafficker no longer requires the affection or trust of the victim's family. In fact, it is detrimental to the trafficker's criminal activities to have the victim remain in contact with the family, or for the family to attempt to contact the trafficker to check on the well-being of their child. Thus, trafficker tactics shift significantly after recruitment is completed and the phase of victim exploitation begins; **in the control and exploitation phase, families of victims are no longer a tool to abuse, but a liability that needs to be shed.**

Interviews and FGDs conducted for the present study identified that in order to exercise control over a victim, a trafficker will highlight real or invented friction between the young person and their parents or other family members, and position themselves as a trusted person in the victim's life. The trafficker will encourage the victim to reduce contact with immediate family members, and to instead spend more time with the trafficker. This tactic is useful for reducing the victim's perceived ability to reach out to family for help: the trafficker instils in the victim a sense that they are detached from their family and cannot rely on family members for assistance. It also ensures that the victim more easily succumbs to the psychological pressure of their exploitation, and reduces the chances of them attempting to escape. Thus, **the study identifies a new indicator for human trafficking: the victim's contact with their family being restricted by the traffickers (intimate partners) following a quick relationship that resulted in the young couple moving to a different city or country.**



“The traffickers spend one to two months observing the relationship of the victim with their family. Then, they start isolating them from their family, making them lose touch with their relatives, so that they cannot handle the psychological pressure later on.”
(FGD participant)

Another key control tactic used by human traffickers is that of **artificial debts**. This tactic is discussed in the literature on human trafficking.²⁷ A number of interviewed survivors reported that their **traffickers—family members, friends, partners or landlords—controlled them through financial pressure**. The trafficker tells the victim that he or she owes them money. Such artificial debts are accrued at various points when, for example, friends (traffickers) tell the victim that they spent money on the victim during shopping activities, for paying hotel bills or for the purchase of drugs that they consumed together.



“That’s exactly what they’d tell me. They realised that I had nowhere to go. After allowing me to stay in their house for several days, they told me that I owed them for providing me with food and a place to sleep. I was indebted to them.”
(Male survivor)

²⁷ See, for example, UNODC, 2020, Global report on trafficking in persons 2020: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tip/2021/GLOTiP_2020_15jan_web.pdf

Survivor Story: Drita

Drita (pseudonym) was a child when she was trafficked for sexual exploitation by friends in Albania. One day her friends said that they had some money and were able to buy some clothes for themselves and for Drita, and then, later on, they would go to a bar together. Later that night, Drita accompanied her friends to a hotel where her friends said that she had to have sex with the men who were in the hotel, and that she would earn a lot of money in doing so. When Drita refused the traffickers shouted at her, and threatened to kill her.

Similar methods are used by traffickers who act as the intimate partner of the victim. Such victims are told by their partner that they are wealthy. The trafficker buys the victim clothes and expensive dinners, but then, later on, tells them that they have to work to repay the debt.



“They provided the survivor with a lavish lifestyle at the beginning and then they told her that she would have to pay off everything. She was told that her family couldn’t pay them and she was too young to work, so the only way was exploitation.”

(FGD participant)

Intimate partners (traffickers) also use the tactic of telling the victim that they have debts that their partner (the victim) has an obligation, as their girlfriend or spouse, to help them repay. The victim feels a sense of obligation to assist the partner and succumbs to sexual exploitation in the hope that it will be only for a very brief while, until enough money has been raised to pay off the debts.



“He came from a poor family and told me they had taken out a loan to build their house. Because of that, we had to earn money to repay the loan.”

(Female survivor)

While the tactic of controlling victims through artificial debts has been identified in the literature on human trafficking previously, the present study identifies for the first time that victims who have close connections to their traffickers succumb easily to this means of control because they do not want to disappoint the traffickers, who are their friends or intimate partners. Victims may agree to service an artificial debt because their friend or partner has bought them something, and they feel obliged to repay them. According to key informant interview and FGD participants, this tactic works very effectively, particularly in the cases of women and girls trafficked by their intimate partner. The victims succumb easily to engaging in exploitative work in order to service a family debt or some other artificial expense. Because the victim is in love with the trafficker, they may endure exploitation for a long period because they want the debt to be repaid so that they can return to the relationship they had before the exploitation began.

The study further identifies that **there is often a pattern of rapid escalation in the level of force and threats where the victims know their traffickers.** The study found that more

forceful control methods are applied by traffickers when subtle control tactics are no longer effective. According to key informant interview and FGD participants, more forceful control tactics are quickly adopted by traffickers when the method of artificial debt no longer works and the victim requests to leave the situation of exploitation or attempts to flee.

The interviewed survivors reported being threatened by traffickers with arrest and detention, violence and even death if they did not comply with their traffickers' demands. Some survivors reported that their traffickers threatened them soon after they were transferred to the place of exploitation. The traffickers would intimidate them, saying that they knew important people who would harm the victim, instilling in the victims the fear that they would be imminently physically assaulted through beating or stabbing.



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“She started threatening me, telling me that I had no other choice but to... but to sleep with those people. She threatened to kill me. She swore continuously at me. She used words that you cannot imagine, yelled at me. She forced me to sleep with those people.”
(Female survivor)



“He told me that he would find a job for me. Then he’d lie and say that he couldn’t find one. He started threatening that he would kill me if I didn’t work on the street. He threatened me with a knife, too.”
(Female survivor)

Traffickers also threaten to harm the loved ones of the victims, especially parents and younger siblings. According to some survivors, the traffickers threatened to kidnap the victim’s siblings and take them to the same place of exploitation. As the traffickers had previously inserted themselves into the life of the victim, the victim was well aware that the traffickers knew their address and the school the siblings attend. Thus, **threats by traffickers who are known to the victim to kidnap and harm the victim’s siblings or parents are a very effective means of controlling victims.**



“The trafficker threatens to harm the victim’s family because it is one of their main weaknesses. The phrases used are: “I know where your family lives”; “I know you have a sister”; “If you don’t do this, I’ll do that”; “I know where you were today near this school”, because the traffickers are constantly monitoring their victims. And then the victims stop caring about themselves to focus only on their families’ well-being and safety. This is how these mechanisms and techniques work.”
(FGD participant)

This finding also indicates that trafficking victims and their families may have a lack of trust in law enforcement. The victims themselves try to resolve the situation of exploitation and of threats without reporting it to the authorities. This could mean that **victims and their families are unaware of ways of reporting human trafficking cases and the support services available to them, or do not believe that the authorities will be able to protect them, or both.**

Traffickers frequently use violence to control their victims. In addition to threats of violence, many survivors reported that they suffered regular and acute violence at the hand of their traffickers. For some, the violence started soon after they were transferred to the place of exploitation.

The majority of the interviewed survivors reported not experiencing violence at the hand of their trafficker until they were moved to the place of exploitation. As noted above, the traffickers use various recruitment tactics to lure victims to the place of exploitation—whether in a different city or a different country—and it is only after their transfer to this place that the tactics of control, including violence, begin. Some of the interviewed survivors reported trying to flee the place of exploitation as soon as they realised that they were being exploited. Adult survivors realised very quickly, usually on the first day of their transfer to the place of exploitation, that they had been trafficked for labour or sexual exploitation, or both. Their response to this realisation was to request to leave, or attempt to flee. At this point the traffickers exert control over the victim through violence. In most cases this violence continued until the victim either finally escaped or was rescued.

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“I continued to refuse and say that I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t imagine sleeping with any man, any old man, of any race. Then they both threatened me that unless I did it, my life and my son’s life would be over. He beat me as soon as we came home, and I was forced to sleep with the men he brought home. My cries, tears, the violence, everything was heard by our elderly neighbour.”

(Female survivor)

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“A storage room was available at the coffee shop, where beverages and supplies were kept. There was a bed in the room, and he told me I needed to sleep and that it was my room. I expressed my discontent with the room because it was small, locked, without windows, filthy, and had a lot of items inside. But as soon as I did that, he pulled my hair and told me that I had to do what he said. This happened on the day I arrived, and it was then that the terror began. Nothing my friend had promised me was fulfilled; it was the polar opposite. All I thought I knew was a lie.”

(Female survivor)

Some survivors reported that the **violence escalated over time**. The traffickers increased the frequency and severity of beatings as a means of exerting ongoing control over the victims. Some interviewed survivors reported being regularly assaulted with various household objects, in addition to being punched and kicked.

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“Later, his violence escalated, and he hit me in the head and stomach with hard objects.”

(Female survivor)

Another common method of control used by traffickers is **confinement to the place of exploitation**. A number of survivors who were trafficked for sexual exploitation reported that they were physically confined to a room in a house, hotel or brothel. The victim was often exploited in the room in which they were confined, and ate and slept in the same room. The door was kept locked, and was either windowless or the window was locked to prevent the victim from escaping. The room was often guarded by the trafficker or their accomplices. Some survivors reported being tied to the bed or another heavy object in the room.

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“He kept me locked in the room; he tied me to my bed, beat me to the point of bleeding.”

(Female survivor)

Victims are also often **controlled by their traffickers through confiscation of personal documents, such as passport, driver’s licence or ID card**. A common tactic used by traffickers is to promise victims that after a certain period of work, their personal documents would be returned and they would be allowed to return home. Some survivors reported that as they were in a foreign country and, without their passport, they felt that they would be unable to escape and return home. Without a passport they would be unable to travel home by air, or prove their identity to law enforcement officers.



“This went on for nearly seven months and—this is what really hurts me—seven months is a long time. I stayed locked up for seven months in there. As soon as I arrived, he took my passport away. I never got paid.”

(Female survivor)

Victims are often further controlled by their traffickers through confiscation of their mobile phone or restriction of its use. Many survivors reported that their trafficker confiscated the phone as soon as they were transferred to the place of exploitation. Some survivors reported that they were able to make phone calls to their family but that their calls were monitored by their traffickers to ensure that the victims did not reveal their exploitation to their families or attempt to seek help. In some cases, the traffickers forced the victims to call their family just once to let their parents know that they had gone abroad and no longer wished to remain in contact with them. This finding suggests a key human trafficking indicator that parents in particular need to be made aware of: **the sudden move to another city or abroad, coupled with the victim suddenly declaring that they wish to cease all contact with them.**



“I couldn’t contact my family. They didn’t allow me to have a phone. They took it away, forced me to call my mother and inform her that I had moved to another country, had started a family, and was expecting a child, and that she should not contact me anymore.”

(Female survivor)

Traffickers also control their victims by drugging them. Some survivors who were trafficked for sexual exploitation reported being forced to take drugs, a tactic used to keep the victim subdued and compliant. **Victims are forced to consume or inject a range of drugs.** Some interviewed survivors reported being forced to use cocaine, while others did not know which drugs they had taken. However, they reported feeling very sedated and confused for the duration of their exploitation. As highlighted above, this finding highlights the links between human trafficking activities and serious organised crime: the traffickers have access to various drugs and are well-versed in forcing them on their victims.

Some survivors reported that, after a period of weeks of this treatment, they developed drug addictions. Traffickers then used the tactic of telling the victims that they owed the traffickers money from the purchase of the drugs, which the victims would have to pay back through their exploitative labour.



“They would bring different people and offer me cocaine, so I was high all the time, I wasn’t myself.”

(Female survivor)

For victims of sexual exploitation, both adults and children, a specific control tactic used by traffickers is blackmail. Traffickers in an intimate relationship with their victim may film their sexual activities, and later use these videos to blackmail the victim into continuing to be sexually exploited, threatening to share the videos with the victim’s family or post them online. The victim’s sexual exploitation might be filmed in private homes, brothels or elsewhere.



“They threaten them by saying that they will tell the family what their daughter is doing. They also blackmail them through videos.”
(FGD participant)

The study identified that some control tactics are extremely effective for controlling certain groups of victims. **For child victims, threats are extremely effective.** Children are less able than adults to rationalise whether the threats are likely to be carried out. As this quote from one interviewed survivor, who was trafficked as a child, shows, traffickers do not even have to threaten violence; they can simply threaten that they will become homeless:



“They told me that if I left, I would live on the streets all alone. I was a child who didn’t understand; I had no idea what threats meant. They would tell me that if I left home, the bogeyman would come and get me.”
(Male survivor)

For victims who are trafficked by an intimate partner, the control tactics appear to be very effective. After having been groomed for a period of weeks or months, and believing that they are in a loving relationship with their partner, it is very difficult for the victim to understand how the person they love has changed so suddenly. Key informant interview and FGD participants posited that **victims who are trafficked by intimate partners are likely to remain compliant because they often remain in love with their trafficker, even during their exploitation.**

In summary, the control tactics used by traffickers who know their victims are similar to those used by traffickers who have no relationship with the victim. As noted in previous studies on human traffickers, the tactics of threats, violence, confinement and confiscation of identity and travel documents and mobile phone are often used to control the victims.²⁸ However, the present study identifies for the first time that traffickers known to the victim can manipulate them more easily through the use of artificial debts and threats. Because the victim believes that they are in a relationship or are close friends with the trafficker, they may comply when told that they have to service an artificial debt. Because victims trafficked by an intimate partner know that their trafficker knows the address of their parents, they may remain obedient when the trafficker threatens to send videos of the victim being sexually exploited to the parents. Because the trafficker has inserted themselves into the family life of the victim, it is also very easy for them to threaten to harm the family. Traffickers known to the victim can also much more easily than other traffickers (strangers) manipulate the family, by making the victim call them to tell them that they have moved to another country with their intimate partner or friends and no longer wish to stay in touch with them.

This study also identifies that there is, in many trafficking cases where the trafficker is known to the victim, an escalation in the use of control methods. Most interviewed survivors reported that, at least in the early phase of their exploitation, control methods

²⁸ UNODC, 2009, Anti-human trafficking manual for criminal justice practitioners. Module 4, https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/TIP_module4_Ebook.pdf

used by the traffickers mostly involved threats. It is only when the trafficker's preferred control tactic (artificial debts and threats) is no longer effective (when, e.g., the victim tries to flee) that the traffickers adopt more forceful tactics of the use of violence, drugs and confining the victim to the place of exploitation. This suggests that traffickers prefer, where possible, to control victims using more subtle methods, such as debts and threats, rather than using forceful means such as violence and confinement. This is likely because violence may only be effective in the short-term, while drugging the victim can have unintended effects, such as the victim no longer being able to perform the exploitative work, or falling ill and needing hospitalisation, and confinement may be human resource intensive, with the trafficker or their associates required to guard the place of confinement around the clock to prevent escape. Victims who have been physically abused or suffer acute psychological distress are also unlikely to be productive in terms of sexual or labour exploitation. Thus, it is in the trafficker's financial interest to avoid more forceful control methods where possible.

Effects of relationships on escape of victims

The study identified a number of important ways in which relationships between victims and traffickers may inhibit the victim's ability to escape a situation of exploitation. Due to the paucity of research into the dynamics of the relationships between victims and traffickers, and the effects on the escape of victims, the following findings are novel and shed valuable light on the role of relationships in victim decision-making processes regarding escape.

The study found that children who are trafficked by family members are reluctant to flee a situation of exploitation because of a sense of obligation to their family. The study identified that children who are trafficked by family members are vulnerable, as a result of their young age and their relationship with their traffickers, to ongoing exploitation, and they may be reluctant to escape exploitation because they feel they must support their family financially. One male survivor interviewee who was trafficked as a child reported, for example, that while he despised having to beg on the streets when he was a child, he felt obliged to do so to provide financial support to his family.



Survivor Story: Genti

Genti (pseudonym) was a child when he was trafficked into forced begging and criminal activities by his grandparents in Kosovo. The grandparents controlled Genti by the use of threats, telling him that if he didn't beg or if he ran away he would have to live on the streets, alone. Genti said during the interview that he continued to beg in Kosovo and Albania because of feelings of family obligation. He wanted to flee the situation of exploitation but felt that he had nowhere to go.

Findings from the interviews with survivors who were children at the time of their exploitation further highlight the fact that **children, because of their young age, have trouble identifying their situation of exploitation as a situation that is unusual and illegal**. Survivors who were trafficked when they were children reported that they simply did as their parents or grandparents instructed them to do, and did not consider questioning the reasons for their exploitation, or whether other children experienced similar exploitation. For example, one female survivor interviewee reported that, as a child at the time of her exploitation, she did not know that sexual abuse perpetrated by male family members and other men was not normal. It was only some years later when she became a teenager that she realised that she was being exploited. This personal story suggests that human trafficking prevention activities need to target children, as well as parents and guardians, as children are less likely than adults to understand that they are being exploited, and thus require education on what constitutes healthy relationships, what constitutes exploitation and who human traffickers might be (including family members).

Survivor Story: Agnesa

Agnesa (pseudonym) was trafficked as a child by her father for sexual exploitation in Albania. The father was described as poor and mostly unemployed, only working occasionally. When Agnesa was nine years old she was sexually abused by her father, and trafficked by him for sexual exploitation. The father acted as her pimp, organising men (mostly friends) to sexually abuse her in return for payment. This sexual exploitation continued for seven years. Agnesa reported not understanding that her home situation was not normal until she was at least eleven years old. During the interview Agnesa explained that she was easily controlled by her father because of her young age, and her inability at the time to understand that she was being abused and exploited.

The study further identified that **victims may be reluctant to flee situations of exploitation because of feelings of love and affection towards the trafficker**. Female victims who are trafficked for sexual exploitation by an intimate partner may agree to service a real or artificial debt for a protracted period because they are in love with their trafficker, and it takes them some time to understand that they have been exploited. **Interviewed survivors who were trafficked by their intimate partner reported experiencing significant feelings of betrayal and disappointment, accompanied by disbelief that someone that they cared for could change from someone seemingly kind and loving, to someone violent and threatening.**



“I felt terrible. The person I loved let me down.”
(Female survivor)

The victim’s exploitation may continue for months or even years, with the victim feeling reluctant to flee because of a sense of love or duty—albeit mingled with disappointment and disbelief—to their intimate partner. Key informant interview and FGD participants noted that these victims require, after their eventual escape, long-term reintegration support, including intense psycho-social counselling, to help the victim understand that they had been trafficked by their intimate partner.

Indeed, across all relationship categories, the study identified that some victims are slow to flee a trafficking situation because they experience intense disbelief and confusion that the person they cared about had exploited them. In the case of victims trafficked by friends, interviewed survivors reported that they were shocked that their friends had deceived them for the perpetrators’ financial gain. Interviewed survivors reported that they were reluctant to leave the situation of exploitation because of feelings of affection towards their trafficker, and an ongoing, albeit waning sense of trust in them. These feelings made victims succumb longer to their exploitation. They would entertain thoughts of escape, but memories of happier times and promises of travel and adventure together would lead them to suffer their exploitation a bit longer in the hope that the situation with their trafficker would return to how it was prior to their exploitation.



“He was someone I trusted.”
(Female survivor)

Furthermore, the study identified other factors that come into play regarding a victim’s ability to escape a trafficking situation. As noted in previous sections of the report, traffickers prey on the socially vulnerable. They spend time identifying the vulnerabilities of the victim, including their family and economic situation and, during recruitment and control, manipulate these vulnerabilities to their advantage. The traffickers know, for example, that some of their victims come from difficult family backgrounds, and that if they flee a situation of exploitation, they will have no family to support them after their escape. Especially for young victims who have grown up in difficult home environments, the lack of real or perceived family support is a major factor inhibiting their escape from trafficking. A number of interviewed survivors, when asked about their efforts to escape being exploited reported that, while the situation they were in at the time was terrible, they had nowhere else to go. They also reported that their traffickers frequently reminded them of their lack of a family support network and that if they escaped they would end on the street, hungry and without money.



“There was nothing I could do because I had nowhere to go, nowhere to stay, and no one to help me.”
(Male survivor)

This suggests that many trafficking victims are unaware of the support services available to them in Albania. This finding is supported through other research conducted in 2021 by

UNICEF Albania, where surveys identified that some 41 percent of surveyed youth were unaware of any forms of support available to trafficking victims. This highlights the immense work that needs to be done in terms of raising awareness among Albanian youth of the phenomenon of human trafficking, who can be a human trafficker, reporting mechanisms and the support services available to victims.²⁹ With such knowledge, victims may be better positioned to escape and seek assistance, even when they are trafficked by someone that they know.

Some victims are reluctant to escape their traffickers because of feelings of shame and fear of stigma. As noted above, some victims are blackmailed by their traffickers who take photos and videos of them being sexually exploited. Victims may be deeply concerned that the trafficker will send these materials to their families, or post them on the Internet, leading to the victim's family or community shunning them. This fear is justifiable, as ostracism from the family can occur in some cases after a sex trafficking victim has escaped. One interviewed survivor, for example, reported managing to flee a situation of sex trafficking, running to her family home, and being immediately rejected at the front door by her father.

It is also important to highlight that, while the victim's relationship with the trafficker may negatively affect their ability to escape, it is relationships with others that encourage the victims to flee the situation. For example, one interviewed female survivor endured sexual exploitation for months but the moment the trafficker threatened to traffic her daughter for sexual exploitation, she gathered the courage to flee. In another case, the victim knew that her parent was searching for her (she had seen a missing child advertisement about her on television) and thus, knowing that she was loved and being sought, she managed to gather the courage to successfully flee her trafficker. This suggests that victims who have supportive families are better positioned than others to escape trafficking situations, and that more work needs to be done on raising the awareness of families, especially parents, on human trafficking, the importance of talking to children about healthy relationships and the importance of supporting children and youth who have become trafficking victims.

It is important to note that, despite the barriers that prevent escape from a trafficking situation, interviewed survivors demonstrated incredible resilience in terms of enduring their exploitation and planning their escape. The survivors reported they were constantly plotting their escape, with most eventually managing to flee the situation by themselves. In only a small number of cases was the place of the victim's exploitation raided by police, while in all the other cases the victims managed to break free of their trafficker's control and independently escape from the house, factory or other place of exploitation.

In summary, victims who are trafficked by someone they know may endure exploitation for a protracted period, and delay fleeing the situation, because of various feelings, such as obligation, love and affection towards their trafficker. For child trafficking victims, the sense of obligation to family plays a very important part in a child's reluctance to flee. For them, their young age is an important factor in their inability to escape: they may be

²⁹ See UNICEF Albania, 2021, First wave survey study on youth knowledge, attitudes and practices regarding human trafficking in four regions in Albania. Report on findings, <https://www.unicef.org/albania/media/3616/file/First%20Wave%20Survey%20Study%20on%20Youth%20Knowledge.pdf>

unaware that they are being exploited, and, moreover, be unlikely to know where to go to seek assistance. The victim’s feelings of love and affection towards the trafficker may also delay their escape. Especially for those who are trafficked by an intimate partner, the victims may experience intense disbelief that they have been exploited by someone that they care about. They may delay any attempt at escape while they grapple with these emotions, and hope that their relationship with their trafficker will return to how it was previously. These findings suggest that there is significant opportunity for anti-trafficking policymakers and practitioners to strengthen mechanisms to prevent human trafficking through efforts to educate children and youth, as well as their parents or guardians, regarding human trafficking and what constitutes a healthy relationship; to increase knowledge among all Albanians regarding the various ways to report suspected human trafficking cases; and to increase knowledge among the children and youth—as well as their families—regarding the support services that are available to victims.

Role of relationships in vulnerability of victims to re-trafficking

The study identified that victims’ feelings of trust and affection for their traffickers can make them vulnerable to re-trafficking by the same perpetrators. Key informants who participated in interviews or FGDs for this study highlighted the fact that some victims are reluctant, after being rescued, to provide any information on the perpetrators or cooperate with the police. There is a tendency for some, especially those who have been trafficked by a family member, intimate partner or close friend, to place the blame on themselves, rather than on the trafficker. In such cases, some victims may attempt to flee the police station or family home to reunite with their trafficker. This finding highlights the importance of immediate post-rescue or escape support for trafficking victims. Victims require immediate shelter, medical services and psycho-social counselling services in order to help them understand that they are now safe and to provide them with space for recovery and reflection.



“They are vulnerable to re-trafficking by the same person, especially if that person has not been convicted. The same trafficker is much more dangerous because they already know the victim’s weaknesses.”
(FGD participant)

Victims who are trafficked as children by family members appear to be at a heightened risk of re-trafficking by the same perpetrators. As discussed in previous sections of this report, those who have been trafficked by a parent or grandparent feel a sense of obligation to support their family. Some of the interviewed survivors who were trafficked as children reported regularly running away from home, only to return to the situation of exploitation soon afterwards because they felt obliged to support their family. This feeling of obligation was usually combined with a feeling that they had nowhere else to go, and there was no support available to them or their family. This finding suggests that increased efforts are required by anti-trafficking entities to raise awareness among children of the support services

(especially housing, shelter, education, livelihood skills training) that are available to them and their struggling families.



“They’re my parents no matter what.”
(Male survivor)

Victims who have had children with their intimate partner who is also their trafficker are also at heightened risk of re-trafficking by the same person. They feel obliged to remain in contact with their trafficker because of the children. Thus, even after the victim manages to flee the situation of exploitation, they find themselves returning the trafficker’s phone calls, or agreeing to meet so that the trafficker can see their child. This makes the victim extremely vulnerable to being coerced or forced into ongoing labour or sex trafficking. For example, in the case of one interviewed female sex-trafficking survivor, the victim managed to flee her intimate partner and, for a time, break off all contact with him. However, she felt obliged to speak to him when their child became sick, and agreed to meet him only to be trafficked again.

It should be emphasised, however, that at the time of the interviews most of the survivors reported that they were no longer at risk of re-trafficking. During the time between their escape and the interview they had received support services, including mental health support, health services and legal support, and some survivors were cooperating with the police on the investigation and prosecution of their trafficker(s).

When asked what the survivors’ thoughts on the traffickers were now, at the time of interview, most survivors reported that they no longer have contact with them and have no plans to speak to them again.



“I haven’t seen the girl (trafficker) since, at all. I don’t want to see her and I don’t want to have anything to do with her. I don’t know what she’s up to and I don’t care. I don’t see her in the neighbourhood where I visit my mother. It’s in the past; I don’t think about her anymore; it seems like a bad dream: a nightmare.”
(Female survivor)

Some interviewed survivors who were trafficked by their intimate partner suggested that they now have a love-hate relationship with the trafficker. Even if they have cut off all connection with the person, they still remember the feelings of love they had for them, but are also overwhelmed by feelings of hate for what their partner did to them. This highlights the importance of providing victims with long-term support, to help them recover from their experience and prevent them returning to the same trafficker, or falling victim to others.



“I used to love him so much, a love that turned into hate. Now he is just somebody that I don’t know. It feels like a nightmare, a hallucination. I want him to suffer like I did; he deserves it.”
(Female survivor)

The survivors who were trafficked as children by family members reported that they no longer want a relationship with the family member(s) who trafficked them. They are no longer young, and can now, as adults, understand that they were exploited. The interviews with these survivors suggested that through ongoing support from the shelter and other organisations, they understand the risks of trafficking and are confident that they would not be exploited by anyone in the future.

“I haven’t seen them since then. I haven’t spoken to them on the phone in months. I’m no longer that little boy, who didn’t understand anything.”
(Male survivor)

In summary, the study identifies that relationships between victims and traffickers can negatively affect the ability of victims to flee situations of exploitation, and can, furthermore, have a negative effect on their vulnerability to re-trafficking by the same perpetrator. However, through comprehensive support services, victims can recover from their trauma, understand the motivations and control tactics of their traffickers, and take a decision to cut off all contact with them, as well as to pursue legal action. This finding highlights the important role of comprehensive and long-term reintegration services in Albania to ensure that victims are supported to recover and break free from the risk of re-trafficking.



Conclusions

This study represents one of the first efforts, internationally, to explore the dynamics of the relationships between victims and traffickers, and how relationships affect victim recruitment, control, escape and re-trafficking. The findings are important for improving our understanding of how human trafficking crimes are evolving in the current era and, thus, how entities working in the anti-trafficking field need to redirect their resources in order to better prevent human trafficking and protect victims.

The study finds that recruitment methods are ever evolving. Traffickers are increasingly forming relationships with victims and their families in order to facilitate victim recruitment and their transfer to a place of exploitation. Some traditional recruitment methods remain popular, such as promising victims employment, study opportunities or travel abroad. However, traffickers are now also using other methods to identify and recruit victims. For example, they now attempt to identify potential victims via social media. Recruitment is also increasingly localised. Traffickers have become increasingly sophisticated in their ability to assess potential victims in terms of their vulnerabilities and desires in order to identify the best ways to establish a relationship with, and subsequently groom them. Traffickers—especially young male traffickers—are increasingly forming false relationships with young Albanian females in order to recruit them to be trafficked for sexual exploitation. They establish relationships with the victims, often through initial contact via social media, and then capitalise on the situation to easily transfer the victim to a location for exploitation. These relationships are often rushed, with affection and trust easily manipulated by the trafficker to coerce the victim into sexual or labour exploitation, or both. Female perpetrators often perform the role of friend to the victim, recruiting them and handing them over to a larger criminal group for exploitation.

The study finds that the control tactics used by traffickers known to the victim are similar to traditional methods. However, the study highlights that such traffickers can manipulate the victims more easily through artificial debts and threats. Because the victim believes that they are in an intimate relationship with the trafficker, or are close friends with them, they may be more compliant when told that they have to service an artificial debt. Due to the fact that the trafficker has inserted themselves into the life of the victim, the victim will likely believe the threats regarding kidnap of siblings or parents. Such blackmail is effective because the victim is aware that the trafficker knows the home address of the family. The study further finds that, in cases of trafficking in which the victim knows the trafficker, there is a pattern of escalation in control methods. The traffickers use more subtle methods at the beginning of the exploitation (i.e. debts and threats), but when these methods are no longer effective the trafficker uses more forceful control tactics, including violence and confinement.

The study finds that the relationship between victim and trafficker may negatively affect the victim's ability to escape from a situation of exploitation, and a sense of family obligation plays a significant role in children's reluctance to flee such a situation. This is often coupled with the notion that the children have nowhere else to go, and no one will support them or their family. As a result of feelings of love, affection and trust, victims trafficked by intimate partners or friends may be slow to realise that they are being exploited, and also slow to

make a decision to flee the situation. Relationships with traffickers also have effects on a victim's vulnerability to re-trafficking by the same perpetrator. Many victims may not want their trafficker or traffickers to be punished. Those who have children with their trafficker, or who have family ties, may be vulnerable to returning to the same person and suffering further exploitation. This highlights the need for victims to receive comprehensive and long-term support to break re-trafficking cycles.

The study also highlights the fact that human trafficking in Albania is a form of organised crime. The traffickers operate in organised groups, and adults (mostly women) and children are not only trafficked in Albania, but also across Europe and even farther afield. Traffickers are often engaged in various other criminal activities, including theft, burglary and drug trafficking. They have become increasingly sophisticated, and widely use social media as a tool for identifying new victims.

In conclusion, the study identifies several key areas for intervention by relevant government agencies and other stakeholders to strengthen mechanisms to prevent human trafficking and protect victims. It should be noted that some of the suggested areas for intervention are those that were highlighted by the survivors during the interviews.

For prevention, **there is a need for more awareness raising of the risks of human trafficking. In particular, children and youth in Albania need to have a better understanding of what human trafficking is (as well as other forms of exploitation, violence and abuse), recruitment methods (especially awareness of the dangers of social media), who can be a human trafficker, where victims can go to seek help and access protection and support services, and their rights to those services.** This awareness needs to start when the children are young, perhaps ten years of age, as many interviewed survivors reported that children of age 13–14 years are particularly vulnerable to human trafficking, and suggested that more needs to be done to educate children in school about the risks of human trafficking. School and community-based learning opportunities could strengthen their knowledge of the key indicators of human trafficking, and where they can go for support services if they are at risk or already exploited.

Prevention efforts that target young males and females may reduce the risk of offending. The interviews conducted for the present study highlighted the fact that many traffickers are young Albanian males who traffic their intimate partners for sexual exploitation. The interviews and FGDs suggest that victims trafficked by young male perpetrators for sexual exploitation provide a relatively easy means for traffickers to make money, but that the traffickers feel little remorse for their actions. They continue to traffic more victims because the activity is lucrative. However, the study also clearly identified that females play important roles in human trafficking: they are often responsible for, at least, recruiting and transferring victims to the place of exploitation. To mitigate the risk of (re-)offending, early engagement, perhaps targeted work with at-risk populations, would yield positive outcomes.

In the areas of both prevention and protection, **there is value in developing parental programmes to facilitate discussion about sexual health, sexual abuse and violence and healthy and unhealthy relationships, as well as about the availability of support services and methods for reporting suspected human trafficking.** A crucial first aspect of this education

is to raise the level of understanding of parents and caregivers of the indicators of human trafficking, including the rushed nature of a relationship, and youth moving to a different city or country and abruptly cutting off contact with the family. A number of interviewed survivors reported that they felt unable to speak to their families about, e.g., their relationship with their trafficker (intimate partner), but wished that they could have spoken to their mother about their partner to try to understand whether the relationship they were in was a healthy or unhealthy one. Public health, social service, child protection and education professionals may play a crucial role in supporting parents in speaking to their children about relationships, strengthening communication between parents and children and encouraging families to seek support from service providers. This may encourage parents to intervene when they suspect that their child has been or is being trafficked, and enable children and youth to identify a negative relationship when they are in one. In turn, stigma attached to human trafficking may be reduced, and parents encouraged to support children and youth who have been trafficked. Dedicated capacity building may be required to assist the professionals working with children and parents.

Furthermore, there is a need for increased efforts by anti-trafficking entities to **identify and support individuals and families in crisis**. In particular, increased efforts need to be made by relevant government agencies and NGOs to identify families experiencing poverty, debt (from, e.g., gambling), substance abuse or violence, and provide such families with socio-economic support. As highlighted in the findings sections of the present report, it is poor families who suffer from debt that traffic children for forced begging or other forms of exploitation. As also highlighted above, children face acute challenges in escaping situations of trafficking when it is their family members who are the traffickers. Early intervention and the provision of socio-economic support to struggling families will reduce the likelihood that parents will take a decision to traffic their children, and provide support to children who have been exploited by family members for them to escape a situation of exploitation.

In the area of reintegration, to reduce the risk of re-trafficking, **there is a need for increased provision of immediate, and long-term specialised care for all victims, especially children and youth who have been trafficked or experienced violence**. Such specialised care includes comprehensive and child and youth-friendly services, including mental health care, health care, education, access to free legal aid and, for youth, access to livelihood skills training and paid internships or decent job placement. All victims—children and adults—require quality and sustainable reintegration services to reduce their vulnerability to re-trafficking by the same perpetrators or other traffickers. Specialised services should be strengthened to support victims suffering from substance addiction or mental health issues, or both.

Finally, **there is a need for all key stakeholders and duty-bearers to strengthen their efforts to combat organised crime in Albania**. Human trafficking is a form of organised crime that spans criminal activity in the areas of victim recruitment (i.e. through the abuse of Internet technologies), control (through, e.g., violence, threats, forced drug use) and the generation of significant profits through the trafficking of adults and children, alongside other crimes, such as drug trafficking, theft and burglary. Relevant entities should continue to strengthen the fight against human trafficking by further progressing towards establishing a solid track record of investigation and prosecution of cases. At present, key anti-trafficking entities in Albania operate in silos. This calls for a coordinated response from all agencies—government and non-government—that are involved in crime prevention activities, and victim protection.

There is also value in future studies further exploring some key findings from the present study that merit additional attention. Such studies could endeavour to **conduct similar research with male trafficking survivors, and also explore the narratives of LGBT trafficking survivors**. They could explore whether the tactics used by human traffickers, as reported above, are the same as, or different from, those used for male and LGBT victims. More research is needed to **understand the precise ways in which human traffickers utilise social media and other channels to identify potential victims, and the approaches they use to identify and capitalise on an individual victim's vulnerabilities**. Such research may be helpful for identifying new measures to prevent human trafficking recruitment, especially through the Internet. Future research could **explore the role of female perpetrators in human trafficking offences**. Females appear to play supporting roles in such crimes. In the present study, female perpetrators were mainly recruiters. Studies involving surveys or interviews with female recruiters may uncover vital new information on the motivations and activities of female offenders, as well as whether there is a trend for former victims to become recruiters or traffickers. Further research is also needed to better understand human trafficking as a form of serious organised crime. This study uncovered important links between human trafficking, theft, burglary, drug trafficking and other criminal activities. However, dedicated studies on serious organised crime in Albania are needed to understand more the nexus between the different types of crime in the country. Finally, future studies could **explore the motivations and tactics employed by traffickers from their perspective** through anonymous surveys and through interviewing convicted traffickers. The voice of human traffickers remains largely silent in the literature on the phenomenon. The present study could only report on the perspectives of survivors and government and NGO anti-trafficking practitioners and policymakers. Finally, in conducting future research studies with survivors, **researchers could also consider adopting the same victim-centred approach employed in order to ensure the protection of trafficking victims in research data collection activities**.



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