

**United Nations Secretary-General's in-depth study on violence against women
Sustainable Social and Professional Reintegration
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The Situation

The conspicuous absence of trafficking statistics from Romania alarmingly indicates the lack of national interest in human trafficking and the situation of trafficked Romanian citizens. Victims have been largely marginalised by all segments of society. It is only recently that mass media has begun to report their plight with a degree of compassion or outrage, finally identifying trafficking as a human rights issue. Public compassion and perception of 'victims', however, lags far behind.

The overwhelming majority of victims of trafficking are exploited youth who are often runaways or castaways from dysfunctional homes where they have already suffered physical, psychological and sexual abuse. Romania is a country whose crippled economy and weak social service structure provides virtually no social safety nets to assist them. With a scarcity of jobs in a male dominated society, young girls are particularly vulnerable to carefully crafted offers promising 'unique' opportunities that will bring good jobs and good money outside the country. Impoverished, abused, and without education or family guidance that would foster intelligent decision-making, these young women become easy prey to savvy traffickers who befriend them and tempt them with offers they can hardly refuse.

Police reports indicate that when young people finish high school in rural areas, they frequently move to urban areas. Young people search for better opportunities, more excitement and the trappings of Western culture, which they perceive to be more easily accessible in large cities. Many fall prey to trafficking syndicates and see their dreams collapse while being exploited and abused. Upon their return to Romania psychological, medical and social care provided in a specialised shelter should support these women and girls to find their way back into Romanian society.

There are thousands of victims waiting to be assisted in rescue and reintegration. Without any reintegration programme, the majority of these victims (re)turn to prostitution. They are ashamed of what has happened to them and are almost exclusively looked upon not as victims, but as active and willing participants or even criminals. Ashamed of the stigma and often sold by family and friends, they view themselves as deserving the life that was forced upon them without finding refuge and care at home. The religious culture in Romania, predominantly Orthodox, provides only little help to this problem. Trafficked persons are stigmatised as 'unforgivable' and receive no hope for redemption. So, where can they turn? Who saves these children and young women from the brutal crimes committed upon them?

The Services

Reaching Out Romania (ROR) provides shelter, counselling and support to women and girls trafficked for sexual exploitation. ROR literally travels to wherever girls and women are left by local authorities in order to pick them up and start the long process of recovery. Through extensive counselling in both, group and individual settings, foundations for renewed self-esteem

and social integration are being laid. Counselling services with on-site social workers are provided around the clock.

The programme, which was supported by the German Government through the Sector Project in 2004, aims to fully integrate victims of trafficking into Romanian society by equipping women and girls with all necessary skills to lead an independent life once they leave the programme. ROR's current shelter is situated in a rural area and has twelve beds, one kitchen and two bathrooms. Besides mere accommodation ROR offers psychological, medical, educational and vocational assistance as well as life skills training. Particular emphasis is put on life skills in the 'home' environment (menu planning, shopping, budgeting, etc.) in order to facilitate a rapid and practical re-entry into society. The organisation assists trafficked persons also in finding accommodation for the time after the programme.

Access to education is a priority, also because many of the victims come from rural areas with only very limited educational opportunities. Basic to advanced skills are evaluated on an individual basis and education is provided free of charge to the victim. Even though the girls and women are expected to continue their education and to find a job, they are not required to pay for the services provided by ROR. Regular employment assists them in establishing their autonomy, in gaining their independence and ultimately in moving out on their own. When a victim decides to move out of the shelter counselling services continue to be provided as needed.

In 2003, ROR has opened a tailoring workshop that employs women from the reintegration programme. This initiative produces bed linen for local hotel businesses and is almost self-sustained. While re-orientating their lives under psychological supervision women and girls have the opportunity to develop tailoring and managerial skills. Their monthly wages are saved in personal accounts until the time they leave the programme. This activity's final goal is to enable the girls to open their own business using the skills and money they get in the programme.

Medical care in Romania is poor. Despite the Romanian Government's efforts to improve health care services, doctors and medical care personnel are poorly paid and generally have to supplement their income to survive. As a result qualified doctors look for employment in larger cities such as Bucharest, where services are generally better paid. Many doctors also try to go abroad for work in order to earn salaries consistent with their education. In the state-run system where health care is supposed to be provided at no charge, a poorly paid medical community will almost exclusively provide care only when paid for. Consequently, medical care for trafficked girls and women is restricted to available funds. For Reaching Out Romania this implies strong financial limitations.

The Individual Programme

The specific needs of each programme participant are carefully monitored and evaluated from the very beginning. Girls and women are often traumatised, ashamed and carry a societal stigma that is very difficult to break. It is vital to help victims in building basic living skills through training and education. A tailor-made programme should assist them in dealing with stress trauma as well as it should help victims to find their ways back into society. Basic skills include reading, social interaction, self-evaluation and self-esteem, selecting clothes and dressing. All stages of counselling, educational enrolment, educational progress reports and medical

evaluations are retained in detailed records describing the individual progress and milestone development of the beneficiaries.

Since its foundation in 1999, Reaching out Romania has provided care and shelter to 127 victims of the sex traffic trade. Even though the organisation does not set any time limit for residence, the beneficiaries' progress is carefully managed and tracked to ensure safe and lasting inclusion into society. At present the success rate of ROR is 84% with 31% of the victims living in the shelter, 37% of girls and women being reunited with their families and 16% living independently. The remaining 16% of women and girls are back on the streets.

The Perspectives

Reintegration without lasting alternatives has little chance for success. Without a sound programme and a safe environment, women who have been rescued maintain the risk of returning to the only form of earning their living they are experienced in. Many victims of trafficking have received little education and possess only a few life skills. Hence, it is vital to provide a safe nurturing environment that starts the process of healing and education for these victims of crime as well as to lay a stepping-stone for their independence and healthy self-esteem.

As one option, Reaching out Romania sees a great potential in developing the concept of agro-tourism further: attracting tourists into the region by offering them friendly service and fresh local produce in an appealing setting. This would help to overcome the conventional 'no future' perception of agricultural occupation amongst youth on the one hand as well as foster community building between generations in rural areas. A bed-and-breakfast place in a region with enormous potential for tourism could in the long run generate funds to cover the expenses for the shelter for trafficked women and girls. Naturally grown products produced by small farms in the community will be sold to the pension in order to be used in the restaurant. With the money obtained from selling the products, local farmers will be encouraged to produce quality goods. The agro-tourism staff will facilitate meetings between producers and other potential beneficiaries. Reaching out Romania seeks to create alternatives also for producers of agricultural goods and to encourage them to open their own bed-and-breakfast hotels.

Lessons Learned

When a woman or a girl after having been trafficked is returned to Romania but not referred to an effective reintegration programme, she will go back to the same abusive and/or poor family with no job, but a strong feeling of shame and guilt and the high risk of being re-trafficked. She knows the recruiter and assumes that people in the community also know what happened to her. In order to break the cycle of abuse or re-trafficking, trafficked persons need to learn that they are not perpetrators but victims and that – with some support – they have positive long-term perspectives in their societies. However, this calls for a change of attitudes and perceptions, both in the minds of victims and the public at large. More programmes that promote a long-term and empowering approach in assisting returning victims are needed. After having consulted and supported numerous victims of trafficking Reaching Out Romania advocates for a change of anti-trafficking strategy. Emphasis has to be put on programmes promoting prevention and long-term reintegration.