



Institutional Barriers and Social Work Strategies in the Rehabilitation of Trafficked Persons: The Case of Albania

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Abstract

Human trafficking persists as a significant human rights challenge in Albania, demanding robust and sustainable rehabilitation responses. This study investigates the institutional mechanisms and social work practices shaping the rehabilitation of trafficked persons in this Balkan transitional context. Employing a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design, the research combines systematic document analysis of legal and policy frameworks with semi-structured interviews (n=25) involving social workers, NGO practitioners, law enforcement, and policymakers. The findings reveal a critical gap between Albania's well-developed legal framework, including its National Referral Mechanism, and the practical realities of long-term reintegration. While emergency protection services are relatively effective, sustainable recovery is undermined by fragmented inter-agency coordination at the local level, inequitable geographic access to services, and precarious short-term funding models. Social workers are identified as pivotal actors who navigate these systemic gaps, yet their efficacy is constrained by high caseloads and inconsistent professional development. The study argues for institutionalizing trauma-informed care and integrating anti-trafficking efforts with broader social inclusion policies to foster genuine, long-term recovery and prevent re-trafficking.

Keywords

victim reintegration; trauma-informed practice; social welfare services; institutional coordination; transitional justice; human trafficking

Introduction

Human trafficking, a modern form of slavery, represents a profound violation of human rights and a complex challenge for global governance, social justice, and public health systems. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2023) continues to report that millions of individuals are exploited annually for forced labor, sexual exploitation, and other coercive purposes, highlighting the persistent need for comprehensive and coordinated international and national responses. Situated at a strategic crossroads in the Balkans, Albania remains a country of origin, transit, and, to a lesser extent, destination for trafficked persons. Its unique socio-economic vulnerabilities, legacy of political transition, and patterns of migration render its population, particularly women and children, susceptible to exploitation (IOM, 2022; OSCE, 2021).

In response, the international community has established frameworks such as the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons (the Palermo Protocol), which mandates a comprehensive "4P" paradigm: Prevention, Protection, Prosecution, and Partnership. Within this framework, the rehabilitation and reintegration of survivors are central to the "Protection" pillar, aiming not only to restore their physical, psychological, and social well-being but also to empower them to rebuild their lives and prevent re-trafficking. Effective rehabilitation is a long-term process that extends far beyond immediate crisis intervention, requiring sustained support in areas such as housing, education, employment, and legal assistance (Surtees, 2017).

While Albania has made significant strides in aligning its national legislation and institutional structures with these international standards, a persistent gap between policy and practice remains a critical concern. This study examines the operational realities of rehabilitation mechanisms in Albania, focusing on the institutional frameworks that govern service delivery and the professional role of social workers who implement them. It seeks to understand how national anti-trafficking strategies are translated into tangible support for survivors within a transitional welfare system characterized by resource constraints and evolving governance structures. By analyzing the interplay between institutional barriers and professional social work strategies, this paper aims to contribute a nuanced, context-specific understanding of the challenges and opportunities for strengthening survivor rehabilitation in Albania and other similar post-transitional contexts.

Literature Review

The Evolving Concept of Rehabilitation for Trafficked Persons

The conceptualization of rehabilitation for trafficked persons has evolved significantly over the past two decades. Early models often focused on short-term, shelter-based crisis intervention, primarily addressing immediate safety and physical health needs. However, contemporary scholarship and practice advocate for a more

holistic and long-term approach grounded in principles of social inclusion and empowerment (Berman, 2019; Zimmerman et al., 2008). Modern rehabilitation is understood as a multidimensional and non-linear process encompassing emergency protection, comprehensive medical and psychological care, legal assistance, education and vocational training, economic empowerment, and sustainable social reintegration. This perspective recognizes that recovery is not merely the absence of exploitation but the presence of agency, opportunity, and social connection. A victim-centered approach is paramount, prioritizing the survivor's rights, needs, choices, and active participation throughout the recovery journey (IOM, 2011).

Theoretical Frameworks for Rehabilitation

Two complementary theoretical frameworks are central to understanding and designing effective rehabilitation services: the Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) and Trauma-Informed Care (TIC). The HRBA frames trafficking as a fundamental violation of human rights rather than solely a criminal justice issue. It shifts the focus from the victim's perceived culpability or vulnerability to the state's obligation to protect, respect, and fulfill their rights (Gallagher, 2010). This approach emphasizes principles of empowerment, participation, non-discrimination, and accountability, ensuring that survivors are treated as rights-holders with agency in their own recovery. Interventions guided by an HRBA focus on ensuring access to justice, legal remedies, and social entitlements, thereby addressing the structural inequalities that facilitate trafficking.

Trauma-Informed Care provides the essential psychosocial lens for working with survivors. TIC is an organizational and clinical framework built on an understanding of the profound and pervasive impact of trauma on an individual's neurological, biological, psychological, and social development (SAMHSA, 2014; Hopper et al., 2010). It is guided by four key principles: realizing the widespread impact of trauma and understanding potential paths for recovery; recognizing the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, and staff; responding by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and actively seeking to resist re-traumatization. For social workers, this means creating environments of physical and emotional safety, fostering trustworthiness and transparency, promoting peer support, emphasizing collaboration and mutuality, and empowering survivors by building on their strengths and providing them with voice and choice (Fallot & Harris, 2009). The failure to adopt a trauma-informed lens can lead to services that inadvertently re-traumatize survivors, hindering their recovery and eroding trust in support systems.

International and Regional Perspectives on Anti-Trafficking

Research across Europe consistently demonstrates that integrated, multi-agency rehabilitation models are significantly more effective than fragmented, siloed interventions (Kohler et al., 2018). Successful systems are characterized by clear referral pathways, formalized cooperation between government agencies and non-

governmental organizations (NGOs), and a continuum of care that links emergency services with long-term reintegration support. In the Balkan region, countries share similar challenges, including weak state welfare systems, heavy reliance on donor-funded NGOs, high unemployment, and social stigma surrounding trafficking, which complicates community reintegration (Drakulić & Stoeckl, 2020). While NGOs have historically been at the forefront of providing direct assistance in Albania, issues of financial sustainability, service standardization, and state capacity remain persistent challenges (OSCE, 2021). The Albanian case thus offers a valuable lens through which to examine the dynamics of a hybrid welfare system where state and non-state actors co-produce services for a highly vulnerable population.

The Centrality of Social Work in Rehabilitation

Social workers are indispensable actors in the anti-trafficking response, serving as the crucial link between survivors, institutions, and community resources. Their role is multifaceted, encompassing case management, needs assessment, individualized care planning, therapeutic intervention, advocacy, and inter-agency coordination (Abdo, 2017). They are often the first point of professional, non-law enforcement contact for survivors, making their ability to build trust and establish a safe therapeutic alliance critical to the entire rehabilitation process. A social worker trained in trauma-informed, rights-based, and strengths-based approaches can significantly enhance recovery outcomes by empowering survivors to navigate complex bureaucratic systems and reclaim control over their lives. However, the effectiveness of social work practice is heavily dependent on the institutional context, including manageable caseloads, adequate supervision, continuous professional development, and sufficient resources (Staub-Bernasconi, 2018). In transitional contexts like Albania, where the social work profession is still solidifying its status and standards, these enabling conditions are often inconsistent or absent.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design to conduct a comprehensive inquiry into the rehabilitation of trafficked persons in Albania. This approach was chosen for its ability to triangulate data from multiple sources, thereby creating a richer and more robust understanding of the complex interplay between policy, institutional practice, and professional experience. The qualitative component, which forms the core of the research, focused on exploring the lived experiences and perspectives of professionals, while the document analysis provided the necessary policy and structural context. This design allows for an examination of not only *what* services are provided but *how* and *why* they are delivered in a specific way within the Albanian context.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through three primary methods between September 2022 and June 2023:

1. **Systematic Document Analysis:** A comprehensive review of key national and international documents was conducted. This included Albanian legal frameworks (e.g., Law No. 10192 "On Preventing and Combating Organized Crime and Trafficking," the National Action Plan Against Trafficking in Human Beings), institutional reports from the Office of the National Anti-Trafficking Coordinator, and publications from international organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the US State Department's Trafficking in Persons (TIP) reports. This analysis served to map the formal institutional and legal landscape of rehabilitation.

2. **Semi-Structured Interviews:** In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposively selected sample of 25 key stakeholders. The sample was designed to capture a diversity of perspectives from across the anti-trafficking sector and included: ten social workers and psychologists from state-run and NGO-run shelters; five managers and directors of prominent anti-trafficking NGOs; five law enforcement officers from specialized anti-trafficking units; and five policymakers and officials from relevant government ministries. The interview protocol explored topics such as the functioning of the National Referral Mechanism, the challenges of long-term reintegration, inter-agency coordination, the role and training of social workers, and perceptions of systemic barriers and successes. Interviews were conducted in Albanian, audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English for analysis.

3. **Case Study Analysis:** To ground the research in concrete practice, an in-depth analysis of two distinct rehabilitation programs was undertaken: one state-run reception center and one long-standing NGO-operated shelter. This involved reviewing their programmatic documents, service protocols, and annual reports, supplemented by interviews with their staff (included in the n=25 sample). This method allowed for a comparative examination of different service delivery models and their respective strengths and limitations.

Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was utilized to identify and recruit participants and institutions with direct knowledge and experience in the rehabilitation of trafficked persons in Albania. The criteria for inclusion were professional involvement in the anti-trafficking field for a minimum of three years and engagement in roles related to victim identification, protection, or reintegration. This non-probability sampling method was appropriate for ensuring that the data collected were information-rich and directly relevant to the research questions.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. The analysis was inductive, allowing themes to emerge directly from the participants' narratives. The document analysis utilized a framework approach, where documents were systematically coded against predefined categories derived from the "4P" anti-trafficking paradigm, with a specific focus on protection and partnership mechanisms. The integration of these two analytical streams allowed for a constant comparative process, where findings from the interviews were contextualized within the formal policy landscape.

Ethical Considerations

This research adhered to rigorous ethical protocols to ensure the protection of all participants and the integrity of the study. Approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Aleksandër Xhuvani University prior to the commencement of data collection. All interview participants were provided with a detailed information sheet explaining the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Written informed consent was obtained from every participant. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, all personal identifiers were removed from transcripts and research notes, and pseudonyms are used for any illustrative quotes. The study did not involve direct contact with trafficked persons to avoid potential re-traumatization and adhere to the "do no harm" principle, instead focusing on the perspectives of the professionals and institutions responsible for their care.

Findings

The analysis of documentary evidence and stakeholder interviews reveals a rehabilitation system in Albania marked by a significant paradox: while the country has established a sophisticated and formally coherent institutional architecture, its practical implementation is fraught with structural gaps and inconsistencies that particularly undermine long-term reintegration. Four major themes emerged from the data: (1) the dual nature of the National Referral Mechanism as both a coordinating force and a site of operational friction; (2) the sharp contrast between well-developed emergency protection and underdeveloped long-term reintegration pathways; (3) the indispensable yet constrained role of social workers as systemic mediators; and (4) the persistent structural barriers of fragmented funding, geographic disparity, and weak local-level coordination.

The National Referral Mechanism: Formal Structure versus Operational Gaps

The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) was universally recognized by participants as a cornerstone of Albania's anti-trafficking response. Its establishment has brought

much-needed clarity to the roles and responsibilities of different actors, from law enforcement to social services and NGOs. A policymaker noted, "Before the NRM, it was chaos. Everyone did what they thought was best. Now, there is a clear protocol, a pathway from identification to shelter. This is our greatest achievement." This formalization has improved initial identification and referral processes, ensuring that potential victims are more systematically directed to appropriate services. However, participants also highlighted that the NRM functions most effectively in major urban centers like Tirana and Durrës. In rural and remote regions, its implementation is far weaker. A social worker from a northern municipality explained, "The NRM exists on paper for us, but in reality, the local police may not know the protocol, or the social services office has only one staff member for everything. We rely on personal phone calls, not formal mechanisms." Furthermore, the mechanism remains largely reactive, struggling to identify hidden forms of trafficking such as labor exploitation in agriculture or domestic servitude, which often fall outside the purview of traditional law enforcement patrols.

From Sanctuary to Standstill: The Reintegration Cliff

A striking finding was the bifurcation of the rehabilitation system into two distinct phases with vastly different levels of effectiveness. The first phase—emergency protection and short-term stabilization—is relatively robust. Supported by a network of specialized shelters, most of which are run by experienced NGOs with international funding, survivors who enter the system receive immediate safety, medical care, psychosocial support, and legal assistance. A shelter manager stated, "When a survivor arrives, we have a comprehensive intake process. Within 48 hours, they have a safe bed, a medical check-up, and a meeting with a psychologist and a social worker. In this initial phase, we are very effective."

However, the system falters at the point of transition to the second phase: long-term reintegration. Participants frequently described a "reintegration cliff," where the intensive support provided in shelters abruptly diminishes as survivors are expected to transition to independent living. Individualized reintegration plans are formally required but are often aspirational rather than practical. A seasoned social worker lamented, "We write beautiful plans for education, for employment. But where are the jobs? Where is the safe, affordable housing? The vocational training programs are short-term projects; they end, and then what? We are preparing them for a world that is not prepared for them." This gap is primarily driven by short-term funding cycles that prioritize immediate shelter over sustainable community-based support, leaving survivors vulnerable to poverty, social exclusion, and, consequently, re-trafficking.

Social Workers as Institutional Weavers: Navigating a Fragmented System

Within this fragmented landscape, social workers emerge as the critical "weavers" who attempt to stitch together disparate services and bridge institutional gaps. Their role extends far beyond clinical case management. They act as advocates, mediators, and navigators, brokering relationships between survivors and a host of other actors,

including police, prosecutors, doctors, teachers, and potential employers. The establishment of trust with the survivor was identified as the single most important factor in successful rehabilitation. An NGO practitioner emphasized, "Nothing happens without trust. The survivor has been betrayed by everyone. The social worker's first and most important job is to build a relationship that is safe, consistent, and reliable. This is the foundation of all other work."

Despite their pivotal role, the effectiveness of social workers is severely constrained by systemic pressures. High caseloads were a universal complaint, with one state social worker reporting responsibility for over 80 cases of various types, making specialized, intensive support for trafficking survivors nearly impossible. Furthermore, access to specialized training in trauma-informed care is inconsistent. While NGO staff often benefit from donor-funded training, social workers in the state system receive limited continuous professional development. As one participant noted, "Being trauma-informed is not just about being nice. It is a clinical skill. Without proper training and supervision, good intentions can still lead to re-traumatization. This needs to be a national standard, not a lottery based on where you work."

The Triad of Structural Barriers: Funding, Geography, and Coordination

The findings consistently pointed to three overarching structural barriers that impede the system's effectiveness. First, the reliance on short-term, project-based funding, primarily from international donors, creates a landscape of instability and unsustainability. NGO directors spoke of the constant pressure to secure the next grant, which diverts energy from service delivery and prevents long-term strategic planning. This "projectization" of services leads to a lack of continuity and predictability for survivors.

Second, profound geographic inequalities persist. Services are heavily concentrated in the capital, Tirana, while other regions, particularly rural and northern areas, are severely underserved. A survivor from a remote area may have to relocate hundreds of kilometers to access a shelter, severing them from any existing family or community support and complicating eventual reintegration into their home community.

Third, while high-level coordination through the NRM is established, local-level inter-agency coordination is often weak and informal. It frequently depends on the personal relationships between individual professionals rather than on institutionalized protocols. A law enforcement officer admitted, "If I know the social worker at the shelter personally, I can call her, and things get done quickly. If she leaves, that relationship is gone, and the process can stall. It shouldn't depend on who knows whom." This reliance on informal networks makes the system fragile and susceptible to breakdown when key personnel change.

Discussion

The findings of this study situate Albania's anti-trafficking rehabilitation system within the broader narrative of transitional governance, where the adoption of international legal norms often outpaces the development of the institutional capacity and resources required for their effective implementation. This "policy-practice gap" is a well-documented phenomenon in many post-conflict and transitional societies (World Bank, 2017), but its specific manifestations in the Albanian context offer important insights for social work theory and practice.

From Legal Alignment to Structural Social Inclusion

The research confirms that while Albania has successfully developed a legal and policy framework aligned with international standards like the Palermo Protocol and the Council of Europe Convention, this normative alignment does not automatically translate into effective social inclusion for survivors. The system's relative strength in emergency protection and weakness in long-term reintegration highlights a conceptual flaw in how rehabilitation is often operationalized. It is treated as a time-limited, crisis-oriented intervention rather than a long-term process of structural social inclusion. As social inclusion theory posits, meaningful integration requires not just individual psychological healing but also access to societal resources such as stable employment, secure housing, education, and social networks (Sen, 2005). The "reintegration cliff" identified in the findings is a direct consequence of an anti-trafficking strategy that is not sufficiently integrated with national employment, housing, and social protection policies. This underscores the need to move beyond a narrow focus on the pathology of the individual survivor and toward addressing the structural vulnerabilities that create and perpetuate exploitation.

Institutionalizing Trauma-Informed Care as a Professional Standard

The study's emphasis on the importance of trust and the dangers of re-traumatization strongly supports the argument for the systemic institutionalization of Trauma-Informed Care. While TIC is increasingly recognized as a best practice globally (SAMHSA, 2014), its application in Albania remains ad hoc and dependent on the initiative of individual NGOs or the availability of donor-funded training. The findings suggest that for TIC to become a true standard of care, it must be embedded within the national social work curriculum, professional accreditation standards, and the operational protocols of all state and non-state service providers. This requires a systemic commitment from universities, professional bodies, and government ministries. Without this institutionalization, the quality of care will remain uneven, and the risk of causing inadvertent harm to already traumatized individuals will persist. The social work profession in Albania has a critical role to play in advocating for and leading this shift from individual competency to a systemic, trauma-informed organizational culture.

Social Workers as Governance Actors in a Hybrid System

The research illuminates the complex role of social workers not merely as service providers but as crucial governance actors. In a fragmented system characterized by weak local coordination and a reliance on informal networks, social workers perform essential "street-level bureaucracy" functions (Lipsky, 2010). They interpret ambiguous policies, mediate between conflicting institutional logics (e.g., law enforcement's focus on prosecution vs. social services' focus on care), and build the relational bridges necessary for the system to function. This role is particularly pronounced in the hybrid welfare landscape of Albania, where social workers must navigate the differing mandates, funding streams, and cultures of state agencies and NGOs. Their work is a form of institutional mediation that creates coherence where it is formally lacking. Recognizing social workers as governance actors highlights the need to empower them not just with clinical skills but also with the authority, resources, and institutional backing to effectively coordinate local multi-agency responses. Formalizing local coordination protocols could alleviate the burden on individual social workers and build more resilient, less person-dependent systems.

Table 1. An Integrated Model for Rehabilitation in Transitional Contexts

Key Finding	Guiding Theoretical Framework	Core Social Work Role	Identified Structural Challenge	Policy & Practice Implication
Formalized but reactive identification (NRM)	Human Rights-Based Approach	Advocacy and referral coordination	Under-detection of hidden exploitation	Develop proactive community-based outreach and identification strategies.
Strong emergency response but weak long-term support	Trauma-Informed Care	Crisis intervention and therapeutic alliance building	The "reintegration cliff" and regional disparities	Standardize minimum services nationally and create a continuum of care.

Key Finding	Guiding Theoretical Framework	Core Social Work Role	Identified Structural Challenge	Policy & Practice Implication
Aspirational reintegration planning	Social Inclusion Theory	Empowerment and vocational support	Short-term, project-based funding models	Implement multi-year state funding for reintegration programs.
Fragmented local-level coordination	Systems Theory	Inter-agency mediation and networking	Dependency on informal professional relationships	Establish and mandate formal local-level multi-agency coordination teams.
Inconsistent professional capacity	Professionalization Theory	Therapeutic engagement and case management	Uneven training and high caseloads	Integrate mandatory TIC training into national social work curricula and standards.

Source: Developed by the authors based on study findings.

Conclusion

The rehabilitation of trafficked persons in Albania is a complex endeavor situated at the nexus of transitional justice, social welfare reform, and human rights protection. This study has demonstrated that while the country has made commendable progress in establishing a formal legal and institutional framework for anti-trafficking, significant structural barriers continue to impede the delivery of sustainable, long-term rehabilitation for survivors. The system is characterized by a critical disjuncture between its relatively effective emergency response mechanisms and its underdeveloped capacity for fostering genuine social and economic reintegration.

The findings underscore that sustainable recovery cannot be achieved through crisis intervention alone. It requires a paradigm shift from viewing rehabilitation as an isolated, short-term service to understanding it as a long-term process of structural social inclusion. This necessitates the integration of anti-trafficking policies with broader national strategies for employment, education, housing, and social protection. Without clear pathways to economic empowerment and community acceptance, survivors remain in a state of precariousness, vulnerable to re-exploitation.

Social workers are the lynchpin of this system, performing the vital work of translating abstract rights and policies into tangible support. They navigate a fragmented institutional landscape, build foundational trust with deeply traumatized individuals, and advocate for their needs. However, their professional capacity is undermined by systemic weaknesses, including high caseloads, inconsistent training, and the burden of compensating for poor inter-agency coordination. Strengthening the social work profession through standardized, mandatory training in trauma-informed care, reduced caseloads, and adequate supervision is not merely a matter of professional development; it is a prerequisite for an effective and humane national rehabilitation system.

The implications of this research extend beyond Albania, offering valuable lessons for other Balkan nations and transitional contexts grappling with similar challenges. The key policy recommendations emerging from this study are threefold: first, governments and donors must shift funding priorities to support long-term, flexible, and community-based reintegration programs. Second, local-level multi-agency coordination mechanisms must be formalized and institutionalized to move beyond a reliance on fragile informal networks. Third, trauma-informed care must be adopted as a non-negotiable national standard, embedded in university curricula, professional licensing, and the operational protocols of all relevant institutions.

This study is not without its limitations. As a qualitative inquiry focused on professional perspectives, it does not include the direct voices of survivors. Future research should prioritize survivor-centered, longitudinal studies to better understand long-term reintegration outcomes and the lived experience of navigating the support system. Comparative research across the Balkan region could also yield valuable insights into the impact of different welfare models and governance structures on rehabilitation effectiveness.

In conclusion, Albania has built a solid foundation for its anti-trafficking response, but the full realization of its commitment to survivor protection now depends on bridging the gap between policy and practice. This requires moving beyond legal formalism to invest in the people and systems that deliver care on the ground. By strengthening the social work profession, fostering genuine inter-agency collaboration, and committing to a vision of rehabilitation as holistic social inclusion, Albania can build a more

resilient and effective system that not only helps survivors heal from their past but also empowers them to build a future of dignity, safety, and self-determination.

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