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Social Turbulence and Transformation in the Balkan Region: Challenges of Active Inclusion for Victims of Human Trafficking – A Case Study of Young Girls in North Macedonia

Natasa Dimeska and Marjan Dabeski

Natasa Dimeska[1] and Marjan Dabeski[2]

[1] PhD University "St. Cyril and Methodius" – Skopje, Institute of Social Work and Social Policy, North Macedonia, https://orcid.org/0009-0001-6932-3305

[2] MA candidate, University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Faculty for Law, Kichevo, North Macedonia, https://orcid.org/0009-0003-3807-6529

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Natasa Dimeska.
Email: dimeskanatasa@yahoo.com

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Abstract

Human trafficking in the Balkan region represents a critical human rights issue amid ongoing social upheaval and transformation. This study investigates the intricate challenges related to the social inclusion and reintegration of trafficking survivors, mainly focusing on young female victims in North Macedonia. A mixed-methods approach was employed, which included qualitative interviews with survivors, social workers, policymakers, and law enforcement officials, as well as comprehensive reviews of legal frameworks, policy documents, and statistical data. Key statistics include: nearly 70% of identified victims in North Macedonia are minors (average age ~15), women and girls constitute approximately 72% of global trafficking victims, and annual reported cases in North Macedonia range between 150–200—with forced marriage cases totaling 17 and increasing incidents of online exploitation among adolescents. The findings highlight various reintegration obstacles, such as structural limitations (e.g., inadequate shelter capacity and chronic funding shortages), significant psychological trauma, and widespread societal stigma, all compounded by gaps in existing legal and institutional support systems. Although North Macedonia's legal framework complies with international standards, survivors frequently struggle to access education, employment, and community resources. Recent initiatives aimed at increasing deterrence through stricter sentencing and specialized judicial practices indicate a positive yet inconsistent legal response. This paper offers specific, evidence-based recommendations for policymakers and practitioners to create sustainable reintegration strategies for young trafficking survivors in North Macedonia and the larger Balkan area.

Keywords: human trafficking, social inclusion, reintegration, human rights, legal protection

Introduction

Human trafficking survivors face profound challenges in returning to normal life after their exploitation ends. Reintegration is understood as the process of recovery and socio-economic inclusion following a trafficking experience. This process is multifaceted: survivors must attain safety, stable living conditions, health care, education, and employment to rebuild their lives. In North Macedonia, young female survivors of trafficking often encounter systemic shortcomings that impede this reintegration process. Services may be fragmented, legislation can have gaps in protection, and coordination between agencies is frequently weak. These challenges are not unique to North Macedonia; similar patterns appear across the Western Balkans.

This paper presents a comprehensive analysis of the reintegration of human trafficking survivors—especially young women—in North Macedonia, using structural–institutional and trauma-informed theoretical frameworks. A structural perspective recognizes that reintegration success depends not only on individual recovery but also on addressing pre-existing vulnerabilities and systemic factors (e.g., poverty, legal status, social exclusion) that persist after trafficking. A trauma-informed lens emphasizes that services must be delivered with an understanding of the profound psychological trauma survivors carry, necessitating care that promotes safety, empowerment, and healing. By integrating these frameworks, the paper identifies critical gaps in current reintegration efforts and highlights evidence-based practices.

The analysis begins by reviewing legal frameworks and institutional structures in North Macedonia and neighboring Balkan countries, establishing the context in which reintegration services operate. It then examines the characteristics of survivors and the key barriers they face at structural, psychological, and societal levels. Comparative case studies from Serbia, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina offer insights into regional best practices and pitfalls. Particular emphasis is placed on education, vocational training, and labor inclusion programs as proven avenues for survivor empowerment. The evolution of shelter systems – from immediate crisis care to longer-term support – is explored to underscore the importance of continuity in aftercare. Finally, the paper concludes with concrete recommendations to strengthen reintegration pathways, informed by both the findings in North Macedonia and successful approaches in the Balkan region. The aim is to provide scholars, policymakers, and practitioners with a research-driven foundation for improving the reintegration of trafficking survivors into society and the labor market.

Legal Frameworks and Institutional Structures in the Balkans

The Balkans region has made notable strides in establishing legal and institutional responses to human trafficking. However, significant disparities remain in the effectiveness and coherence of these frameworks across countries. The following section examines the structural and institutional context in North Macedonia, using it as a case study, and highlights both progress and persistent challenges in aligning with international standards.

Structural–Institutional Context in North Macedonia

North Macedonia has developed an anti-trafficking legal framework that aligns with international standards, yet implementation gaps remain. The country is a party to the UN Palermo Protocol (2000) and the Council of Europe's Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (2005), committing it to provide protective measures and reintegration support for victims. National legislation has seen positive amendments in recent years. Notably, the *Law on Foreigners* (2018) introduced a recovery and reflection period and renewable residence permits on humanitarian grounds for trafficking victims. This ensures foreign victims are given temporary legal status to stabilize and decide on cooperation with authorities. Additionally, North Macedonia amended its Criminal Code to include a non-punishment clause for trafficking victims, so that those forced into illegal acts are not prosecuted. In 2022, the *Law on Payment of Monetary Compensation to Victims of Violent Crimes* was adopted, establishing the possibility of state compensation for victims of human trafficking. The designation of the national Ombudsman's Office as the National Rapporteur on Trafficking is another institutional step welcomed by experts.

Despite this progress in the legal framework, there are systemic weaknesses in execution. Formal identification of victims remains very low, typically only a few cases per year, which suggests many survivors are not being brought into the protection system. For instance, aside from one atypical case in 2021, the annual identified victims in North Macedonia has ranged between two and nine. This raises concerns that frontline institutions (police, social workers, labor inspectors) may lack capacity or coordination to detect and refer victims, a point underscored by GRETA (Council of Europe, 2023) in its evaluations. A GRETA visit report noted *"a shift to labour exploitation as the predominant form of exploitation"* in North Macedonia, indicating evolving trafficking trends (from primarily sexual exploitation to more cases of forced labor) that require adaptive institutional responses. Labor inspectors

have been trained under recent initiatives, but GRETA urges clearer mandates and more resources for the Labor Inspectorate. This is vital for the proactive identification of labor trafficking victims and the enforcement of labor rights.

Inter-agency coordination in North Macedonia is formalized through a National Commission and a National Mechanism for Referral of Victims of Trafficking. However, gaps in practice are evident. A 2021 review highlighted that victims can fall through bureaucratic cracks: one case involved a teenage girl who approached authorities for help but was not recognized as a trafficking victim until she persisted in reporting her situation. This suggests that frontline institutions sometimes fail to "connect the dots" and properly apply victim identification criteria, reflecting either insufficient training or weak inter-agency communication. North Macedonia's government funds a program for victim reintegration on paper, listing employment, housing, and continued education as key elements. Yet, after leaving shelter care, survivors commonly face unemployment and housing instability, indicating a disconnect between policy and reality. The country currently lacks specialized reintegration programs to facilitate the economic inclusion of survivors. For example, there are no dedicated schemes to place victims into jobs or support their entrepreneurship. Even existing general employment measures are out of reach – the national Employment Service Agency does not adjust its programs for trafficking survivors or safeguard their data, so survivors avoid registration out of privacy and safety concerns. These structural gaps point to an urgent need for strengthening institutional support and coordination for reintegration in North Macedonia.

Regional Legal Commitments and Coordination Mechanisms

Across the Balkans, countries share similar legal commitments against human trafficking, yet implementation effectiveness varies. Serbia, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina have all criminalized human trafficking and established national anti-trafficking strategies. They collaborate through regional bodies and exchanges (often under the framework of EU accession reforms or the South-East European Law Enforcement Center). All have institutions akin to national coordination committees and referral mechanisms to streamline victim identification and assistance. However, each country's system reveals distinctive strengths and shortcomings that influence reintegration outcomes.

Serbia's legal framework has evolved, with recent amendments introducing reflection periods and temporary residency for foreign victims (paralleling North Macedonia's laws). Serbia also appointed a National Rapporteur (within the

Ombudsman's office) to independently monitor anti-trafficking efforts. This structural move is lauded as improving oversight. Yet, the practical enforcement in Serbia faces challenges similar to North Macedonia's. GRETA's third report on Serbia (2023) notes that trafficking cases are often re-qualified to lesser offenses during prosecution, and victims may not be informed of plea bargains. This undermines justice and can retraumatize survivors. Serbia's framework for victim compensation is underutilized; victims rarely obtain restitution, prompting calls for a state compensation fund and better use of asset seizure from traffickers. On a positive note, Serbia has specialized anti-trafficking police and prosecutors, and it has recently reopened a state-run emergency shelter for trafficking victims. Still, no shelter for adult male victims exists in Serbia to date, reflecting a regional trend where services for men and boys lag behind those for women and children.

Albania presents a somewhat different institutional picture. As a primary country of origin for trafficking victims, Albania has invested in comprehensive victim support structures largely run in partnership with NGOs. Four main institutions offer rehabilitation and reintegration services: three NGO-run shelters (e.g., *Different and Equal* in Tirana, *Vatra* in Vlora, *Another Vision* in Elbasan) and one state-run National Reception Centre in Tirana. This network, supported by the Albanian government and international donors, provides a range of services including shelter, medical and psychological care, legal assistance, and vocational training. Albania's National Referral Mechanism is relatively well-developed, and the country has implemented a *National Action Plan Against Trafficking in Human Beings (2021–2023)* that explicitly emphasizes reintegration (unicef.org). Albanian law also contains innovative provisions like the *Law on Social Enterprises*, which mandates that 30% of employees in certified social enterprises should come from marginalized groups (explicitly including trafficking survivors) (assets.publishing.service.gov.uk). Such structural measures aim to create labor market openings for survivors and are a model of institutional support through legislation. Nonetheless, Albania faces its own difficulties in practice: accessing public services can be bureaucratic and slow for survivors, and long-term funding for reintegration programs remains a concern. An Albanian study noted that while numerous frameworks exist on paper guaranteeing employment, health, housing, and economic aid to survivors, significant gaps and challenges persist in translating those into effective support (unicef.org). This indicates that strong NGO involvement continues to be critical in Albania to fill implementation gaps.

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) has a complex administrative structure (with multiple entities and cantons) that complicates its institutional response to trafficking. BiH has acceded to the same international conventions and has national anti-trafficking legislation. In practice, NGOs are central to victim support in BiH, running shelters and providing services with government funding support. For example, NGO-run shelters in BiH ensure that each child victim is appointed a legal guardian and that specialized accommodations are available – one NGO shelter reportedly established a *separate facility specifically for child trafficking victims*, and another set up accommodation for male victims. These are notable practices in the region, addressing categories of survivors often overlooked elsewhere. Still, coordination between state agencies (such as social services, law enforcement, and immigration authorities) can be inconsistent. The Council of Europe launched a project in 2022 to bolster BiH's capacity to provide essential support and access to justice for trafficking victims. The project focuses on training key groups and ensuring victims can obtain compensation from traffickers' seized assets. BiH authorities have acknowledged that while emergency assistance (shelter, medical care) is usually provided, long-term reintegration support is underdeveloped, partly due to limited resources in social protection systems. As in its neighbors, ensuring sustainable funding and multi-year programs for survivors remains a pressing structural challenge.

Balkan countries have put in place broadly adequate legal frameworks and institutional bodies to combat human trafficking and assist victims. However, systemic shortcomings – from under-identification of victims and patchy inter-agency coordination to insufficient long-term support measures – hinder the journey from victimhood to survivor empowerment. These shortcomings set the stage for examining how they manifest in the lives of survivors and what barriers women, in particular, face when trying to rebuild their lives after trafficking.

Survivor Characteristics and Reintegration Barriers

Understanding the personal profiles of trafficking survivors is essential for designing effective reintegration strategies. In the Balkans, and particularly in North Macedonia, survivors often face deeply rooted structural and institutional barriers that hinder their recovery and social reintegration. The following section explores these challenges, focusing on the socioeconomic vulnerabilities, age and gender profiles, and systemic obstacles that shape the post-trafficking experience.

Structural and Institutional Barriers

Survivors of human trafficking in North Macedonia (and the Balkans generally) often come from socially and economically vulnerable backgrounds. Many are young women with limited formal education and scarce employment history, factors that traffickers exploit and that later complicate reintegration. For instance, a large proportion of identified victims are minors or young adults. UNICEF (2024) reported that in North Macedonia, 70% of identified trafficking victims in recent years were children, an alarming figure far above the global average. In Serbia, data from 2017 to 2022 show that almost half of the identified victims were children, and most were female. This means reintegration programs frequently deal with adolescents or women in their early twenties who have missed out on schooling and come with complex trauma.

Survivors typically face legal and economic hurdles that are structural in nature. Lack of personal identification documents, for example, can impede access to services. Traffickers may have confiscated IDs, or survivors may never have been properly registered in the first place. Without an ID, they struggle to access healthcare, social benefits, or legal employment. Even with ID, legal status can be a barrier for foreign victims: though North Macedonia and Serbia provide temporary residency to foreign victims, navigating the bureaucracy can be daunting, and the short duration of permits can leave victims insecure about the future. Ensuring trafficking victims have legal status is a precondition to reintegration, as it entitles them to services and rights in society. Residence insecurity undermines any attempt to find work or stability.

Another structural barrier is the availability and accessibility of services, especially at the local level. Reintegration requires a coordinated package of support – housing, healthcare, psycho-social counseling, education, and job assistance. If any of these services is missing or hard to reach, the whole reintegration process can falter. In North Macedonia, specialized services for survivors exist primarily in the capital or in NGO-run facilities; rural areas lack local reintegration programs. Survivors returning to small communities may find there are no counselors trained in trauma, no job opportunities that fit their needs, and pervasive social stigma (explored further below). Even basic financial support can be hard to obtain. North Macedonia offers a modest economic assistance stipend to unemployed trafficking victims, but very few survivors successfully receive it. The application is time-consuming, requires proof of a rental agreement and other paperwork, and many victims are discouraged by bureaucracy or discrimination when they apply.

Another institutional shortcoming is the lack of tailored economic reintegration programs. As noted earlier, North Macedonia has no special work integration measures for trafficking survivors, and even general active labor market programs do not accommodate their needs. Serbia and Bosnia also have few, if any, dedicated state-run employment programs for this group. This means survivors must compete in the general job market, often with substantial disadvantages (low education, skills gaps, trauma-related disorders).

Psychological and Societal Challenges (Trauma-Informed Considerations)

Beyond structural issues, survivors face deep psychological wounds and societal obstacles that any reintegration effort must address. Trafficking survivors commonly experience Complex Trauma – prolonged captivity, violence, and abuse result in complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD), depression, anxiety, and difficulties in trusting others. A trauma-informed framework stresses that services need to account for these effects. For example, survivors may have impaired concentration and memory (making it hard to succeed in school or training initially), or they may experience triggers and panic attacks in work or public environments reminiscent of their exploitation. Unless reintegration programs integrate mental health care and trauma-informed practices, survivors might drop out of school, quit jobs abruptly, or avoid seeking help, perceiving environments as unsafe.

Trauma-informed care means creating an environment of physical and emotional safety, empowering survivors in decision-making, and being sensitive to triggers in all interactions. This approach is backed by mental health models such as Judith Herman's stages of trauma recovery (establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma narrative, and restoring connection to community). In practical terms, a trauma-informed reintegration program in North Macedonia would ensure that shelter staff and vocational trainers are trained in trauma awareness. It would allow survivors choices (for instance, in what vocational skill to pursue) to promote a sense of control and agency that trafficking stripped from them. It would also provide long-term counseling and peer support. As one U.S. State Department guide notes, *"a trauma-informed approach includes an understanding of the physical, social, and emotional impact of trauma on the individual"* and adjusts services accordingly. This is crucial in the Balkans context, where formal mental health services are often limited. In North Macedonia and its neighbors, psychological support is generally available during the shelter stay, but aftercare counseling is scarce. Many survivors return to communities where therapists or support groups are nonexistent.

Expanding trauma-informed aftercare, possibly through community-based NGOs or tele-counseling, is an important recommendation emerging from this analysis.

On a societal level, stigma and marginalization present significant barriers. In conservative social environments, victims of sex trafficking (the majority of female cases) may be shamed or blamed for their experience. Instead of receiving empathy, they can encounter rejection from their families or communities. This stigma can be acute in smaller towns or rural areas of North Macedonia and elsewhere in the Balkans, where traditional norms prevail. Young women returning from trafficking may be seen as "dishonored" or as willing prostitutes, an extremely damaging misperception that isolates them and undermines reintegration. Even when families are supportive, the broader community might gossip or ostracize, making it hard for survivors to reintegrate socially or find jobs. Employers might be hesitant to hire a known trafficking victim due to prejudice or so-called "reputational" concerns. Such societal attitudes inflict *secondary victimization*.

Survivors of trafficking may have strained family relationships or a lack of family support. Some were trafficked by family members or sold by relatives, which is a profound betrayal that complicates a return to the family home. Others fear bringing shame or danger to their families if traffickers retaliate. Even well-intentioned families might not know how to deal with the psychological aftermath. Reintegration efforts must often work with survivors' families to educate them about trauma and how to support their daughter's (or son's) recovery. In some Balkan cases, alternative support networks or *"second families"* through mentoring programs have been beneficial. The involvement of survivor mentors or survivor-led organizations (where former victims guide new ones) can provide the understanding and hope that families or society may not readily give.

Survivors' reintegration is impeded by a lattice of barriers: institutional gaps (legal, economic, service delivery) and human factors (trauma, stigma, disrupted relationships). A successful reintegration model must be comprehensive, tackling everything from securing identity papers and stable housing to healing psychological trauma and overcoming social exclusion.

Comparative Case Studies and Regional Best Practices

While all countries in the Balkans face challenges in supporting trafficking survivors, some have begun piloting innovative approaches to improve reintegration outcomes. This section presents a comparative look at practices in the region,

starting with North Macedonia, where notable initiatives coexist with critical service gaps. By analyzing these emerging efforts and persistent shortcomings, we can identify both lessons learned and opportunities for regional improvement.

North Macedonia: Gaps and Emerging Initiatives

In North Macedonia, the journey of a trafficking survivor typically involves an initial rescue or escape, a stay in a shelter, and then an attempt to re-enter society. The primary shelter in the country is run by Open Gate – La Strada North Macedonia, an NGO that has been at the forefront of victim assistance for over two decades. This shelter (sometimes referred to as a transit center or rehabilitation center) provides crucial immediate care, accommodation, medical attention, counseling, and legal aid. However, as Open Gate staff themselves note, *"the reintegration process is very slow and difficult because there aren't many services for victims' reintegration after they leave the shelter"*. This candid observation encapsulates North Macedonia's core gap: post-shelter support. Once a survivor exits the safe house, often due to time limits or resource constraints, she faces a precipitous drop-off in structured support. There are no transitional housing programs or halfway homes funded by the state to bridge the move to independent living. Many survivors have nowhere to go except back to the very communities or even families where they were recruited, risking re-trafficking or abuse. Recognizing this, Open Gate has advocated for expanding shelter capacities and creating local alternative centers for longer-term support. Recently, some mobile teams have been established (with international project support) to do field outreach to vulnerable groups and potential victims in North Macedonia. These teams aim to improve identification and also assist known victims in remote areas, but they are few and not institutionalized yet.

On the positive side, North Macedonia's authorities, under international guidance, have started to incorporate economic empowerment into reintegration strategies on paper. The new National Strategy for Combating Trafficking (2021–2025) includes actions for vocational training and employment of victims. Additionally, the government has begun involving civil society organizations more actively in policy development. Open Gate and other NGOs participate in working groups and campaigns as equal partners. However, these policy-level initiatives will need concrete backing – budget allocations, trained personnel, and effective case management – to change the on-the-ground reality.

A specific shortcoming in North Macedonia is the limited scope of the national reintegration program. While the Ministry of Social Policy, Demographic and Youth

(MSPDY) nominally has a program covering housing, education, and employment, in practice, its reach has been minimal. Few trafficking survivors have benefited from state housing or education scholarships. As mentioned, survivors rarely access public employment services due to confidentiality concerns. One recommendation is for MSPDY to create a confidential referral pathway with the Employment Service Agency, so survivors can enroll in active labor measures (like skills training or subsidized jobs) without exposing their victim status to potential stigma or danger. Also, data-sharing protocols could be improved: currently, the lack of a specialized data system means trafficking cases are often handled ad hoc. The commitment to develop a functional database of trafficking cases could, if realized, help track survivor needs and services provided, enabling better follow-up.

North Macedonia can draw inspiration from its neighbors to pilot solutions. For instance, establishing a small grants program for survivor entrepreneurs (an approach IOM has tried elsewhere) or partnering with companies to create trainee positions for survivors would be new in North Macedonia.

Education, Vocational Training, and Labor Market Inclusion

One of the most critical components of survivor reintegration is achieving economic independence, which heavily relies on education and inclusion in the labor market. Evidence from international research and regional practice consistently shows that survivors who gain skills and secure decent work are far less likely to be re-trafficked or exploited again, and they tend to recover a sense of dignity and agency. This section delves deeper into education and vocational initiatives as evidence-based practices, drawing on both global literature and Balkan-specific programs.

Education forms the foundation of reintegration for young survivors. Many trafficking victims, especially girls, have had their schooling interrupted or never progressed beyond primary education. Completing secondary education is a pivotal goal. As noted in the Albania study, *"young survivors who are supported to complete high school have a better chance of finding decent employment"*(unicef.org).

High school diplomas open doors to formal employment that would otherwise be shut. Moreover, some survivors aspire to higher education; those who manage to enroll in university or professional colleges often experience not only improved job prospects but also personal empowerment and social acceptance. Internationally, NGOs like *World Education* and *UNICEF* have implemented "second-chance

education" programs for trafficking survivors, demonstrating positive outcomes in literacy and numeracy gains and subsequent job placement.

However, pursuing education must be balanced with survivors' immediate needs. A survivor living in a shelter might also be a young mother or have pressing financial responsibilities (supporting family members, for instance). Thus, flexible and survivor-centered educational pathways are recommended. Examples include part-time schooling, distance learning, or vocational high schools that combine education with practical training. In Serbia and North Macedonia, there have been instances where survivors were enrolled in such vocational high schools (for trades like culinary arts or caregiving), allowing them to finish schooling while directly acquiring job skills.

Beyond formal education, vocational training is the cornerstone of reintegration programs worldwide. Training should be market-oriented: programs must ensure that the skills taught match real employment opportunities in the region. If there is demand for hairdressers, IT technicians, or cooks, training programs should align with those fields rather than over-saturating survivors in, say, sewing if local textile jobs are scarce. Identifying sectors open to hiring women with non-traditional backgrounds is key. In this regard, public-private partnerships can be very helpful.

Another best practice is incorporating life skills and soft skills training alongside vocational skills. A trauma-informed vocational program will recognize that survivors might need coaching in things like communication, teamwork, time management, and confidence-building. Role-playing job interviews, teaching how to prepare a CV, and basic financial literacy (budgeting one's salary) can greatly enhance the effectiveness of technical training.

Labor market inclusion also depends on broader economic conditions. High unemployment rates, especially among youth in North Macedonia (which historically are quite elevated), mean survivors are re-entering a competitive market.

Evidence-based practices also highlight the importance of *holistic support alongside economic initiatives*. Survivors can't focus on training or work if they are hungry, ill, or worried about their safety. Therefore, successful labor inclusion programs ensure basics are covered: safe housing, childcare for survivors with children, medical care (including trauma therapy), and legal aid if there are ongoing court cases against traffickers. Many programs globally adopt a case management approach:

a case manager coordinates the various services and keeps the survivor engaged and supported throughout. This is an area North Macedonia could strengthen by formalizing case management roles within the Social Work Centers or NGOs dedicated to trafficking cases.

Evolution of Shelter Systems and Post-Shelter Support

Shelter systems are often the first point of contact for rescued trafficking victims and form the backbone of initial rehabilitation efforts. In North Macedonia and the Balkans, shelter services have evolved over the past two decades from rudimentary safe houses to more structured rehabilitation centers. However, gaps remain in the continuity of care once survivors exit shelters, making the evolution of post-shelter support a critical area for development. This section examines how shelter models have changed over time and why the "post-shelter" phase – including transitional housing, community integration, and long-term support – is as important as the shelter stay itself.

Initial Phase – Crisis Shelters

- In the early 2000s, as Balkan countries grappled with human trafficking emerging as a serious issue, the primary response was the establishment of crisis shelters.
- These were often secure, confidential locations where victims (mostly women and children) could stay immediately after being removed from a trafficking situation.
- They provided short-term accommodation—sometimes limited to a few weeks—focusing on safety, basic medical care, and initial counseling.
- North Macedonia's first shelters were set up by NGOs like Open Gate, in coordination with law enforcement and the Ministry of Interior.
- At that time, the understanding of victims' longer-term needs was still developing, so shelters were seen largely as temporary refuges.
- Similarly, Serbia and Bosnia relied on NGO shelters (often with donor support) to receive victims identified by police or at the borders.
- A major evolution since then has been the recognition that a brief shelter stay is insufficient for true recovery and reintegration.

Extended Rehabilitation Centers

- By the 2010s, many shelters had transformed into more comprehensive rehabilitation centers.
- Shelter stays became longer—several months, and in some Albanian cases up to a year or more, depending on individual progress.
- Services expanded to include:
  - Psychological counseling
  - Legal assistance
  - Education (on-site classes or tutoring)
  - Creative therapies (e.g., art therapy, music therapy, group counseling)
- The goal shifted to not only keeping survivors safe but also starting to rebuild their lives from within the shelter.
- Centers began developing individual reintegration plans early on:
  - Assessing whether a survivor needs continued schooling
  - Identifying vocational interests
  - Addressing any health issues
  - Tracing family for potential reunification

PostShelter Bottleneck: Transitional Housing

- The real bottleneck arises post-shelter: once survivors have stabilized and are ready—or required to leave, where do they go next?
- In an ideal continuum:
  - Survivors move into transitional housing, such as semi-independent apartments or group homes, for 6–24 months with light supervision and continued support.
  - They contribute a small amount to rent (often subsidized), gain life skills, and continue work or education.
- This model helps bridge the gap between protective shelter and total independence.
- In Serbia, NGO ATINA provides such support by renting apartments with periodic social worker visits.
- Unfortunately, in North Macedonia, there is currently no formal transitional

housing for trafficking survivors.

- Many survivors have nowhere to go except back to families or communities where they were recruited, risking re-trafficking or abuse.
- Others must live alone with minimal support.

Barriers: Funding and Policy Constraints

- The absence of post-shelter housing is linked to funding and policy prioritization:
  - It is easier (politically and logistically) to justify funding an immediate-response shelter than long-term housing.
- However, evidence shows transitional support greatly improves reintegration outcomes:
  - The UNODC Toolkit recommends transitional housing or assisted lodging as a preferred practice.
- Without it, many survivors risk housing insecurity, homelessness, or falling back into vulnerable situations.

Need for Follow-Up Services

- Best-practice guidelines (e.g., IOM, NEXUS Institute) emphasize that reintegration must include monitoring and assistance well after shelter exit, often up to 1–2 years.
- Follow-up services can include:
  - Regular check-ins
  - Continued counseling (e.g., bi-weekly therapy)
  - Mentorship
  - Emergency assistance (e.g., rent help if a survivor loses a job)
- In North Macedonia, follow-up has been largely ad-hoc by NGOs and not institutionalized or resourced.
- A formal "Reintegration Support Service" within the social protection system could coordinate:
  - Transitional housing, counseling, and referrals to community resources

Community-Based Reintegration (Emerging Practice)

- A newer concept emphasizes building support structures within the survivor's community, rather than relying solely on shelters.
- This includes:
  - Training community mentors
  - Connecting survivors with local resources (e.g., supportive employers, women's groups)
- The rationale: Reintegration means living independently in the community, so early community engagement is vital.
- It must be balanced with confidentiality and safety concerns.
- Community support can also help reduce stigma when local influencers or organizations publicly endorse reintegration.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Reintegrating survivors of human trafficking into society and the labor market is a complex, long-term endeavor that tests the effectiveness of social services, legal protections, and community compassion. This research-driven analysis has highlighted the systemic shortcomings in North Macedonia's current reintegration framework – including gaps in services after shelter, inadequacies in legislation implementation, and weak inter-agency coordination – while also drawing on comparative insights from Serbia, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Grounded in structural–institutional theory, we recognize that true reintegration necessitates changes in the socio-economic structures around survivors (such as accessible education, inclusive labor markets, and supportive legal institutions). A trauma-informed perspective reminds us that policies and programs must be attuned to the psychological scars of survivors, fostering environments of safety, trust, and empowerment.

Several key findings emerge from this study. First, North Macedonia's policy framework, although improved on paper, is not yet delivering sufficient practical support to survivors. Legislative advances (reflection period, victim compensation law, etc.) and strategic commitments (reintegration as a stated priority) have not translated into robust programs on the ground. Identified victims are few, suggesting many victims remain undetected and therefore unreached by any support.

Those who are rescued receive good care during immediate rehabilitation, but face unemployment, housing instability, and social exclusion when that short phase ends. Second, survivors–mostly young women and often minors–face multifaceted barriers: economic marginalization, disrupted education, mental health challenges, and stigma, which existing systems address only partially.

In light of these findings, the following specific recommendations are offered to enhance the reintegration of human trafficking survivors in North Macedonia, with relevance to the broader Balkan context:

- **Establish a Formal Post-Shelter Reintegration Program:** North Macedonia should create a structured program under the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (in partnership with NGOs) dedicated to post-shelter support for trafficking survivors. This program would provide transitional housing (e.g., rent-assisted apartments or group homes) for up to 12–24 months for survivors leaving shelters. It should also include ongoing case management for each survivor, ensuring they have help in accessing healthcare, psychological counseling, education, and job opportunities after shelter exit. The program can draw on Albania's NGO best practices and Serbia's transitional models, institutionalizing them with government backing. Clear admission criteria, confidentiality safeguards, and referral pathways from shelters into this program should be defined. Funding could come from a mix of state budget (perhaps reallocating part of anti-trafficking funds) and international donors initially, with a plan for sustainable state funding in the long term.
- **Strengthen Inter-Agency Coordination and Data Management:** To address identification and service gaps, North Macedonia's National Commission on Trafficking should be empowered to improve real-time coordination between police, social services, labor inspectors, and NGOs. A practical step is developing a National Referral Mechanism (NRM) database or case tracking system that securely logs each identified victim and the services provided to them. This would facilitate accountability – e.g., ensuring that once a victim is identified, social workers follow through with reintegration support and monitor progress. Regular multi-disciplinary case review meetings (at least quarterly) should be mandated, where agencies discuss each ongoing case's status and needs. The Labor Inspectorate's role must be clarified and strengthened with resources so that labor exploitation cases are detected early and referred to assistance, especially given the shift towards labor trafficking. Additionally, appointing specialized reintegration focal points in key agencies (one in the

Employment Service Agency, one in the Ministry of Education for school reintegration, etc.) would improve the expert handling of survivor cases.

- **Expand Education and Vocational Opportunities:** Based on evidence, North Macedonia should ensure survivors can continue their education and gain marketable skills. The Ministry of Education, in collaboration with NGOs, could launch an "Education Second Chance" scheme for trafficking survivors, which might include scholarships for secondary education completion, free enrollment in vocational schools. Partner with businesses and the Chamber of Commerce to create trainee programs reserved for trafficking survivors (even a small quota, say 5 placements per year in major companies, can make a difference).
- **Implement Economic Empowerment and Employment Incentives:** To combat the critical barrier of unemployment, innovative measures are needed. The government could set up a Survivor Entrepreneurship Fund, offering small grants (or micro-loans with forgiveness conditions) to survivors who propose viable small business ideas – be it opening a beauty salon, a tailoring shop, or an online handicrafts store. Training in basic business skills and mentorship from experienced entrepreneurs (perhaps through a civil society initiative) should accompany this. In parallel, introduce incentives for employers: for example, wage subsidies for companies that hire a certified trafficking survivor for at least 12 months, similar to disability employment incentives.
- **Enhance Trauma-Informed and Psychological Support Services:** Integrating trauma-informed principles into every stage of reintegration is essential. It is recommended to train all professionals who work with trafficking survivors – law enforcement, social workers, shelter staff, vocational trainers, health providers – in trauma-informed care. The goal is to ensure understanding of trauma responses and to foster a compassionate, non-judgmental approach. Practically, a long-term mental health support plan should be part of each survivor's case plan. The Ministry of Health can collaborate with NGOs to provide free counseling sessions for at least a year post-shelter. Peer support groups led by trained survivors could be piloted in North Macedonia, giving survivors a space to connect and support each other in healing. Where possib-

le, involve survivor voices in designing these support services – for example, consult survivors on what timings or modalities (group vs individual therapy, creative therapies, etc.) work best, to ensure uptake.

In closing, the reintegration of human trafficking survivors, particularly young women in North Macedonia, is at a pivotal juncture. The issue has been recognized in strategies, and some groundwork has been laid. Still, a concerted effort is required to build a holistic, enduring support system that truly enables survivors to reclaim their lives. Structural–institutional reform, ensuring that laws, institutions, and resources are marshaled in support of victims, combined with trauma-informed care, which fosters empathy, empowerment, and respect for survivors' dignity, form the dual pillars of an effective reintegration framework. The experiences from North Macedonia and its Balkan neighbors demonstrate that while the challenge is great, progress is attainable through sustained commitment, collaboration, and innovation. By implementing the recommendations above, North Macedonia can make significant strides towards a future where survivors of trafficking are not just rescued from their past, but also fully reintegrated as thriving, empowered members of society, free from re-exploitation and filled with hope for the future.

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