March 10, 2008

# Kosovo's women suffer

By Tracy Wilkinson, Los Angeles Times
http://www.latimes.com/news/printedition/front/la-fg-women10mar10,1,4748763.story?ctrack=2&cset=true

She purses her lips in a "tsk-tsk" when asked difficult questions. Questions about her life, about the husband who beats her, the father who denies her an inheritance and a place to live.

Slightly hunchbacked, her thin frame barely fills the several layers of donated clothing she wears. At 26, she looks 15. She has three children and an elementary-school education. When she showed up at the door of a women's shelter here, purple bruises blotched her face and framed her shattered, crooked nose. Chunks of her hair had been ripped out.

"I've been beaten a lot," said Fatima. "They beat me so badly the last time, I could not care for my children."

In the last couple of years, she says, she has spent more time at the shelter, hiding, than in her husband's house. It is only a slight exaggeration.

Fatima is actually luckier than many women in Kosovo, a harsh region weighted by twin burdens of poverty and unenlightened tradition. A United Nations study in 2000 estimated that one-fourth of the female population of Kosovo suffered physical or psychological abuse; Kosovo police last year recorded 1,077 cases of domestic violence.

Fatima and her children were able to escape to a shelter, one of a dozen or so that now operate here. It has given her refuge from the violent men of her family and an alternative to an even darker fate: being sold into the expansive networks that traffic women like chattel in this part of the world.

But for every woman in Kosovo who is saved, an untold number do not make it, according to women's advocates and social workers.

Dominated by ethnic Albanians, Kosovo broke away from Serbia last month, proclaiming itself an independent nation, with fervent backing from Washington. Among Kosovo's many challenges, from building state institutions to combating rampant corruption, is improving its historically unjust and often criminal treatment of women.

Like much of the surrounding, rugged Balkans, Kosovo has long served as a notorious

transit point for the international trafficking of women, mostly from Eastern Europe, who are forced into prostitution or slavery.

After a brutal crackdown by Slobodan Milosevic in 1999, Kosovo came under the stewardship of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the United Nations. During the years since, Kosovo evolved from a transit point into both a source of and destination for trafficked women. Often, Kosovo officials and former guerrilla commanders were complicit in the lucrative trade -- and the resident international community, including peacekeepers and civilian consultants, its market.

Unemployment problem

The question now is whether independence, which is still in an embryonic stage and not universally recognized, will result in a change of status for women and eradication of the trafficking networks. Or whether organized criminal gangs, with allies in the new government, will be given an even freer hand.

"The first thing our government must do, and they've promised a lot, is to fight unemployment. The violence is linked directly to economic conditions," said Naime Sherifa, director of the Center for the Protection of Women and Children in Pristina, the first such organization here. "People are very tired of being poor."

Tired, she said, and ready to explode. Roughly half of Kosovo's generally young population is out of work; the World Bank and other experts believe it could take a decade to dramatically reduce unemployment. Poverty strains Kosovo's families, which tend to be large. Add to that the dislocations of war: Thousands of people were killed and entire villages razed, their residents forced to move to urban areas. There, many live in cramped conditions, disoriented, unsettled in an unfamiliar environment.

The breakdown of family structure and the transfer of populations to cities created an anonymity in Kosovo society that did not exist before the war; as one consequence, it left women vulnerable to traffickers and other abuse, said Wanda Troszczynska, a Kosovo specialist with the New York-based Human Rights Watch.

Women used to be relegated to restrictive lives at home, guarded behind the high-walled compounds that traditionally housed extended ethnic Albanian families, or clans. It wasn't freedom, but it was out of the reach of outside exploitation. Traffickers brought women from elsewhere, such as Moldova and Romania, initially to be shuttled to Italy or other parts of Europe and, after the war, to remain in Kosovo to "service" a growing international population.

Eventually, more and more Kosovo women, ripped from their traditional home life, also fell prey to traffickers and found themselves lured by promises of work, marriage or their own cellphone, only to end up in seedy bars, strip joints and brothels.

Need to enforce laws

In their long march to prove themselves ready to run a state, Kosovo Albanians set up a police force under United Nations tutelage that gradually took up the mission of raiding bars and rescuing victims of sexual exploitation. In 2006, the Kosovo police conducted 99 raids, arrested 28 suspected traffickers and "identified" 50 victims, according to statistics provided by the State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons.

By all accounts, the work by the Kosovo police is an improvement but targets only the tip of the iceberg.

More insidious than the trafficking are the domestic abuse cases. Perhaps tens of thousands of women suffer violence at home or the denial of basic rights, according to human rights activists and social workers. Experts say the problem crosses ethnic lines -- Albanians, Serbs, Roma and others are victims -- and remains vastly underreported.

Igballe Rogova, head of the Kosova Women's Network, an umbrella coalition of about 40 groups, said she was hopeful the government, with the independence issue more or less settled, could put into practice laws that exist on paper.

"Today we have really incredibly good mechanisms on gender equality," she told a European Parliament committee on women's issues in Brussels late last month. "We have a law on gender equality, we have an office on gender equality at the prime minister level and, in every ministry, gender equality officers. We are not happy with the implementation of these mechanisms, but we are very optimistic."

Sherifa said laws grant women the rights to own and inherit property on the same terms as men. But it often does not happen that way.

In the case of Fatima, for example, her father owns nearly nine acres of land, which he has divided among her brothers. But he refuses to give Fatima any, forcing her to live with her husband and children in her father-in-law's tiny house. Seven people live, cramped and unhappily, in the two-room shack.

Both her husband and her father-in-law beat her, Fatima said. Her "offenses" ranged from asking for money to buy medicine for a sick child, or asking for food. Sometimes, she said, she goes days without eating. Fatima has ended up in the shelter three times in the last two years, each time after a beating so severe she could not stand the pain any longer.

Haven for abused

The shelter, run by Sherifa's organization, was the first one in Kosovo. It is a three-story house behind a gate on a quiet street of Pristina. Police patrol it regularly. (The Times was granted rare access to the shelter and its residents on the condition that neither the location nor the victims be identified. "Fatima" is a pseudonym.)

The good news in Fatima's story is that when, bruised and bloodied, she called the police, they came. They took her to the shelter. She returned to the family after the men were briefly detained by the police and ordered not to touch her again. Now, however, it is clear the intervention has failed, Sherifa said, and she will look for a permanent place for Fatima and her children to live.

More than anything, Fatima seems weary. "I just feel sorry for my children," she said. "They see all this violence all the time. I'm afraid it will affect them."

The bad news is the shelters are full, unable to meet the demand; abusers are rarely prosecuted, witnesses too terrified to come forward.

Said Sherifa: "This is something we, and the next generation, will have to work on."