

Moravian Women's Association – Home and Overseas Paper – September 2013

Albanian Women

This is a very abbreviated summary of two talks which Sr Vjollca Mazi gave to us at the European Women's conference in Albania in May/June 2013.

Albania – the poverty

After the second world war, Albania was a strict communist state until 1991. It has had to transition to a free market economy, which causes great hardship to its poor. Almost one quarter of the population lives below the international poverty line, and 5% of the population struggle to put food on the table each day. Poverty is higher in rural areas.

Patriarchal society

As well as its economic problems, Albania has a long history of male domination. Women were taught to obey their father first, then their husband and accept a submissive role.

Customary laws

Albania has a traditional code of customary laws which promote the well known "blood feuds". In addition, under the customary laws, a man has a right to beat and publicly humiliate his wife if she disobeys him. He can cut her hair, strip her naked, expel her from the house, and beat her through the village streets. A man may kill his wife for infidelity or "betrayal of hospitality". A wife may not speak to guests, or enter the mens' room without permission from her husband. These customary laws persist, and encourage violence against women.

The situation today

During the communist period, the State officially promoted women's equality, but in practice it did not happen. Now, despite guaranteed equality under the Albanian Constitution, the old cultural practices have revived, along with poverty, unemployment, and closure of state funded childcare, which add to women's problems. It is common for poor rural families to move to the cities, bringing their old customs with them. In the city they suffer stress and psychological problems, which result in aggression and crime – and women are the victims.

Prostitution

Prostitution is relatively new, but Albania is now among the main suppliers of sex workers to neighbouring countries. Women and girls are also trafficked to work as beggars. The trafficked women are afraid to complain because of fear of reprisals against their families, or because of pressure from their families. State support is poor, they are often arrested and treated as if they were the criminals. In some rural areas, about 80% of adolescent girls drop out of secondary school because they are afraid of being kidnapped and trafficked.

Domestic violence

It is difficult to estimate how big the problem is – because of under-reporting by victims, and gender equality is a new concept. The concept of marital rape and sexual harassment is not well understood, and in rural areas is not considered to be a crime (even by the authorities). Cases

are generally only prosecuted if they result in death, or serious injury. There are a few shelters, but sadly many women accept domestic violence as part of marriage – discussion is taboo, especially in rural areas. The legal age for marriage is 18 for women and men, but about 10% of women are married before that age, and they are usually women without or with only basic (4 years) of education. In rural areas, most marriages are arranged.

The outlook is good!

Many Albanian women live fully emancipated lives – our sisters in the Moravian and Lutheran Church are examples of this. Our sisters work with victims of domestic violence in the town of Elbasan – when we visited them, they were in desperate need of new premises because of the expanding number of women they were helping. Albanian women are patriotic, many fought and died for their country in the second world war. Most girls also received military training during communist times. Girls can now attend university, become doctors, teachers, social workers, and succeed in business, as well as always caring for their families. In the town of Burrel which we also visited, we were given a civic reception by the elected Mayor, who was a very charismatic and outspoken woman politician – a rarity in Albania!



Life is hard for women in rural Albania! – (photo from Sr Vjollca Mazi)

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