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Social Aspects of Family and Homosexuality in Albania

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In communist times (up to 1990), there was an attempt to equalize the working lives of Albanians: women were expected to work in agricultural and manufacturing cooperatives. With the fall of communism, many women were actually relieved to be able to return to working only in the home; however, this reconfirmed patriarchal traditions, and many then found that they no longer had the choice of employment. Some issues that are discussed by Western women (e.g., sexual harassment or lesbian motherhood) are barely considered in Albania. Traditional law forbidding marriage between cousins even to the seventh generation is still generally observed, accounting for the preference for men to marry women from outside their own village or area. In urban areas, there is a gradual reassessment of the needs of marriage, away from the view that a man marries in order to bring a strong young worker into his birth family; however, few Albanian marriages would be viewed by Westerners as equal partnerships. Albanians might well counter this by questioning the validity of Western marriages, whose partners may be apart for months at a time, and by pointing out that far more Western marriages end in divorce than Albanian ones. Same-sex relationships were criminalized until June 1995, although the law was primarily directed at men. There is little tolerance for homosexuality, but the legal age of sexual consent is eighteen for homosexual men and fourteen for lesbians and heterosexuals. Prejudice against homosexuality makes it difficult to make contact with concerned groups. One group founded in the mid-1990s is Gay Albania Society. Rape is a punishable offense, with imprisonment for up to fifteen years if the victim is under thirteen. Reflexions, founded in 1995, was one of the first organizations to focus on the protection of abused women. Trafficking in women and children is a serious problem in Albania. Children and adolescents are at considerable risk of either being kidnapped or lured by promises of jobs or comfortable marriages. Divorced women have proved to be highly vulnerable, especially those with children to maintain and with this hope of a chance to emigrate to escape their “shame” since they are often stigmatized and not welcomed even by close relatives. An estimated 30,000 Albanian women are currently working abroad as prostitutes, half of them in Italy. They cannot afford to live on their own, and their chances of remarriage in Albania are minimal. Prostitution is illegal in Albania, and prostitutes are punished rather than the clients. Albania is used as a conduit for women trafficked from Bulgaria, Moldova, Romania, Russia, and Ukraine and usually taken on to Italy or Greece. A government-funded center for the treatment of trafficking victims was established in Vlore (the port town most easily accessible to reach Italy) with a 30- person capacity. That year, 196 cases of women trafficked for prostitution were recorded.

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