

Afghanistan: Controversy Over Illicit Porn Films

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X-rated clips uploaded onto users' mobile phones.

Officials in the eastern Afghan city of Jalalabad say that they are struggling to contain the sale of explicit sex videos to young people.

Customers buy pornographic content from black market traders who upload them onto their mobile phones.

While the dealers claim business is booming, local officials say they plan tough action, including the possibility of prosecutions, to curb the trade.

Mirza, who refused to give his real name, said he ran a mobile phone shop in Talashi square in the provincial capital Jalalabad.

He claimed that between ten and 20 young people came to his premises each day to buy sex videos.

"If they want old repeats of porn videos I charge them one dollar for each one but if they want new releases I charge them two dollars," he said.

"Everyone not in the know thinks I'm just selling mobile phone ring tones or downloading songs for customers, but actually I'm selling them sex videos.

"Of course, not everyone who comes here wants porn, but I've developed code words for those that do and this is how I know what they're after."

In Afghanistan's highly conservative society, sex - even inside marriage - remains a taboo subject. But exposure to other values via TV, cable networks, the internet and smartphones is leading to increasing questioning of more traditional social norms.

Torbaz, aged 16, said that a friend had introduced him to illegal porn videos. He now bought such films regularly, although he explained that the topic of sex was still viewed as sinful.

"One of my friends showed me these sex movies for the very first time and he also told me where to go to get them," he said. "Now I watch them all the time and in fact sometimes feel as if my mental health has been affected. I seem to have difficulty sleeping unless I watch two or three new videos a week.

"Having sex is seen as a sin here and people are even killed for having premarital relationships, so when I become sexually frustrated I try and control my thoughts."

Another teenager, 17-year-old Suhail, said that he also believed he was addicted.

"I watch porn movies many times a day," he continued. "I'm trying really hard to keep busy doing other things but my mind always becomes distracted with watching more porn. I have to watch these films."

Aurang Samim, director of Nangarhar's department of information and culture, told IWPR that he was disappointed in young Aghans who viewed such videos - and sad at what he described as a clear deterioration in the nation's values.

But he insisted that strategies to prevent distribution of the films had been successful in the past and would be again.

"Porn movies have been sold openly in shops in the past but our campaigns to target sellers and their customers have made an impact," he argued. "The numbers of people trading this material is decreasing because they know and fear they will eventually be caught."

Officials at Nangarhar's department of religious affairs said that they were working together with the department of information and culture, the attorney's office and the police to tackle the issue.

Mohammad Younis Madani, of the department of religious affairs, said any individual found selling pornographic material would receive an initial warning in the first instance followed by potential arrest if caught again.

He also warned that officials would be conducting a series of undercover visits to shops suspected of trading in the videos.

“We have professional people who will accompany us to these phone shops and check what’s happening,” he continued. “We’ve already seized computers and hard disks from those we’ve found to be selling porn movies.”

News of the upcoming clampdown was welcomed by a number of elders in Jalalabad.

Awal Khan Zahid, 50, a resident of third district in the city, claimed pornography was akin to society being injected with poison.

“Both the young and the old need to resist being injected by such a toxic chemical,” he said. “It is so humiliating for a father whose sons watch porn without him knowing. Families must take responsibility for raising their children and young adults properly.”

Abdul Raziq, a resident of Bihsud district in Nangarhar, said he closely controlled what his two adult sons got up to both inside and outside the home.

He said that he had not yet bought a phone for his 18-year-old but that his 21-year-old had recently graduated from school and did own one.

He said, “Two or three times a week I take his phone to check he’s not watching any porn films.”

Fazlullah Mumtaz, a religious scholar, said that watching pornography was dangerous, and advised early marriage as a solution.

He urged parents to ensure their children were married once they reached sexual maturity so as to avoid such temptations.

“Selling these sex movies is prohibited and we feel should feel sorry for those involved,” he claimed. “They are earning unlawful money for their children.”

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