

Azerbaijani Prostitutes Flock to Turkey

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An influx of Azerbaijani prostitutes, some the victims of crime, some the perpetrators, is shaking up eastern Turkey.

Azerbaijani prostitutes, exploiting legislative loopholes and the naivety of their clients, are causing a headache for the Turkish authorities.

Temel Mamedov, a police official from the eastern Turkish city of Trabzon, visited Baku specially last month to discuss the influx of Azerbaijani prostitutes to his region - and to investigate ways to stop the women travelling there in the first place.

Mamedov showed IWPR copies of petitions received from more than a dozen Azerbaijani women who had contacted Trabzon's marriage bureaux to request permission to marry Turkish men.

These petitions had been handed over to the police after the newly married men had appealed for help.

In most cases, the Turkish man had come home following the wedding to find no sign of his new bride - only a flat emptied of its furniture, and all his money and valuables stolen.

Even when the Azerbaijani "brides" are tracked down and deported, they often find their way back to Turkey - and pull the same scam on another unsuspecting Turkish man.

Many of the victims were gullible men from mountain communities who travelled to the city to sell wool in the markets. Having earned some money, they routinely seek casual sex in one of the city's hotels - usually with an Azerbaijani prostitute, who they then marry following a whirlwind courtship.

Mamedov explained that once a woman from a former Soviet republic marries a Turkish man, she becomes a citizen of Turkey and can no longer be deported. Local police can expose as many as 50 fake marriages a month involving Azerbaijani women - around a quarter of them in Trabzon.

While there are no reliable figures for the numbers of Azerbaijani prostitutes working in Turkey, around 15 Azerbaijani women are deported every month.

But as prostitution is not a criminal offence in Turkey, the police are only able to take action if a complaint is received - so this figure probably represents just the tip of the iceberg.

The Turkish authorities use various methods to blacklist the deported women. According to Yaver Isayev, a former frontier official, the Turkish border guards stamp a tiny cross into the deported women's passport, attesting to a criminal record, and your passport number is then entered into the computer database of the Turkish foreign ministry.

However, back in Azerbaijan, the deported prostitutes can acquire new passports for less than 100 US dollars - a sum they quickly recoup when they come back to Turkey.

The Trabzon authorities have also started demanding evidence from would-be Azerbaijani brides that they are not married already. But for around 800 dollars, women can secure an official certificate stating that they are legally single.

Kheiraddin Goja, Azerbaijan's consul general in Turkey, was sacked two months ago, allegedly for conducting illegal business in his official capacity.

But Azerbaijani women are also the victims as well as the perpetrators of crime in Turkey.

The Turkish paper Sabah recently published a disturbing report about the activities of a woman it named Mehriban K. She had been reported to the authorities by another Azerbaijan woman, who had fallen victim to her criminal activities.

Apparently Mehriban K had met the deceived woman and two of her friends in Azerbaijan and offered them what she said were legal and well-paid jobs in Trabzon. It then transpired that Mehriban was actually selling the women to local men for the illegal sex trade.

The trafficking of women is a murky topic in Azerbaijan, because no one has ever been convicted of involvement in it, and no one presses charges.

Azer Allahveranov, director of the Migration Resource Centre, told IWPR some 900 Azerbaijani women had been deported from the United Arab Emirates in the first quarter of 2002. Two airplanes were chartered to bring them home. The case was reported in the Arab press, but never in Azerbaijan.

Another case, that of a certain Rita Atakishieva, was reported in the local press two years ago, after she was arrested. She had allegedly shipped 42 Azerbaijani men and women to Italy under false pretences and taken 300,000 dollars from them. However no more details of what she had done, how she had managed this enormous scam, or what happened to Atakishieva, were ever revealed.

In the case of Mehriban K, the Turkish police decided not to go into the full facts of the case and deported both her and her three alleged victims from Turkey. Temel Mamedov explained that the police generally pay for the costs of deportation with money confiscated from the women themselves. Once they are over the border, in Georgia or Nakhichevan, the women must find their own way home.

There is little sign that the miserable cross-border traffic will stop. Turkish police have already asked the Azerbaijani interior ministry not to issue foreign passports to females with a sex trade record, but the ministry declined, saying there was no way they could verify if a woman had such a record or not.

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