

Azerbaijani Women Driven to Prostitution

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The Baku government's failure to improve social and economic conditions for women has forced many of them to turn to prostitution.

On the eve of International Women's Day earlier this month, Azerbaijani society was shocked by the tragedy of a Baku girl, hoodwinked into working as a prostitute in the Middle East.

A pimp had sold the 15-year-old to a Dubai brothel for \$30,000, after smuggling her through border controls. The girl's fate was only discovered when she managed to phone home.

The scandal surrounding the girl - who is now safely back in Azerbaijan - has highlighted the worsening position of women in Azerbaijani society. Since independence, economic decline, a catastrophic rise in unemployment and soaring inflation have forced many to turn to prostitution.

Azerbaijani women have long worked in Iranian and Turkish brothels, and Nakhichevan, an Azerbaijani enclave in Armenia, has turned into a transit town for the prostitutes, according to the Alieva Society for the Defence of Women's Rights (ASDWR).

It says in some parts of Azerbaijan, especially refugee camps, there have been reports of adolescent prostitution. Girls are forced into this last resort for a few crusts of bread.

Increasingly, the legalisation of prostitution is seen as the best way of protecting these women and curbing the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. ASDWR is lobbying for such a move and has presented the authorities with a draft law for consideration.

The chairman of ASDWR, Novella Dzhafarova, says the issue is all the more pressing as she is convinced prostitution is to some extent sanctioned by the authorities. "I'm not accusing everybody, but we know of cases where the police have sold these girls. We want the government to undertake measures," she said.

Women are turning to prostitution out of desperation. Nearly a third of them are unemployed; they're the breadwinners in nearly a quarter of families; they face discrimination in the workplace and many of those with large numbers of children live in squalid conditions.

For those with large families, employment options are limited. When they are not looking after their children, elderly relatives and keeping house, the kind of work open to them is distinctly unofficial: home teaching, child care, street-trading, menial agricultural work, begging and often prostitution.

Most women work in the public sector where rates of pay, 60-80 thousand manat (\$15-20) per month, continue to be some of the lowest in country. In the male-dominated oil sector, the average monthly wage is 270-300 manat.

The worsening conditions come despite government commitments to remove all forms discrimination against women and bring about an improvement in their social and economic status. If anything, the administration has been working to undermine them.

It forbids Muslim women from having their passport photographs taken with their headwear, preventing female believers from going on pilgrimages abroad.

In the last few years, the state has had some success in promoting family planning, but has failed to get involved in efforts by domestic and international organisations to tackle other problems facing women.

The government recently paid income support to mothers of children whose father were not making alimony payments. But the money was stopped in a move that's affected over 140,000 single mothers.

Housing benefits, free public transport and reductions in communal service payments, all previously provided to teachers - the majority of whom are women - have also been removed. And mothers with large families are no longer exempted from paying income tax and have lost their entitlement to free public transport.

The remaining forms of support are often restricted. For example if the income of a family is over 16,500 manat per person, then the child supplement (9,000 manat, or \$2,200) is not provided.

The government's attitude towards women is pushing them down the path of political struggle. Last year, around 20 Azeri women's organisations founded the Women's Congress. At its founding congress, a pledge was made to work towards defeating the government.

March 8 was supposed to be a day of celebration for women. But how many would have marked the occasion? The lucky few whose husbands earn enough money might have received presents. But most will have pretended to have forgotten the holiday was taking place to save their men any embarrassment.

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