

## **Kazak Prostitution Debate Hots Up**

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Campaigners in Kazakstan say the legalisation of prostitution will help counter the spread of Aids

The Kazak parliament will shortly debate calls for the legalisation of prostitution, but there's little hope of a legislative breakthrough as the authorities remain resolutely opposed to the decriminalisation of the prostitution.

This, despite the fact that it could help curb both the rising tide of HIV infection and the ill-treatment of women.

The former provides the most compelling reason for making prostitution legal - it would enable them to work in proper licensed brothels with good health care provision, thus significantly reducing the risk of Aids transmission.

Some experts estimate that Kazakstan - a country of around 15 million people - currently has the fourth highest per capita HIV rate in the world. But the authorities appear to be closing their eyes to the problem. Officially, prostitution barely exists. According to government statistics, there are just 20 prostitutes in the capital Astana and 34 in Almaty.

But, as virtually every adolescent male will tell you, the reality is quite different - most towns and cities have their well-known red-light districts.

Legalisation of the trade would also protect women from abuse. Marina S, an Almaty prostitute, says she's regularly beaten and raped by local police. "There's nothing I can do about it because I have no rights," she said.

Police chiefs deny that this sort of abuse and harassment is widespread - and insist that officers have been punished when they've been found guilty of such crimes. In December 2000, for instance, three sergeants were convicted of gang raping a prostitute. The men received conditional prison sentences, but, significantly, they did not lose their jobs. This, say campaigners, serves to underline the vulnerability of prostitutes.

The government though is unmoved by the legalisation campaign, although the fact that parliament will debate the issue suggests that it is beginning to take the issue more seriously, particularly as it is under growing pressure to tackle the Aids threat.

Only some officials have expressed public backing for the campaigners, but for dubious reasons. They suggest, for instance, that making prostitution legal would somehow solve female unemployment and provide an additional source of tax revenue for the government.

The majority of officials say the Kazak people and religious leaders would simply not tolerate decriminalisation and would accuse the authorities of immorality.

While this may be true of clerics, it's not an accurate reflection of the views of ordinary people.

Prostitution used to be a taboo subject in Soviet Kazakstan, but since independence, it has become more widespread. People have learned to get used to it. And although no surveys on the subject have been conducted, there are strong suggestions that not as many people might oppose legalisation as the government thinks.

"Prostitutes are the first school of love for every Kazak adolescent and for every normal man," said Almaty student Alexandr Miroshnichenko. "It's no secret that prostitutes will always exist. Demand for them has not diminished and won't diminish in the near future."

Almaty builder Andrei Ignatchenko said "being a normal man" he had, of course, used prostitutes. "I don't consider myself a bad family man - or in any way immoral. This has got nothing to do with public morality."

Another Almaty student, Helena Semashko, said the government was being hypocritical over the issue. "When they want to legalise their stolen money (a reference to a recent decree allowing Kazak citizens with huge foreign bank accounts to transfer their funds back home), they don't ask for the opinion of the people," she said. "But when a big health problem come along, they suddenly start talking about ethics - it's completely absurd."

Despite the official statistics, prostitution has always been a reality in Kazakstan and is now one of the cause of a serious health crisis. The public seems to be divided on the issue - and it will be up to the government to take decisive action. For the moment, though, it favours procrastination.

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