

Kyrgyzstan Becoming Regional "Sex Capital"

Author: [Ulugbek Babakulov](#)

Uzbek prostitutes are flocking to Kyrgyzstan, where better pay and more liberal attitudes make for an easier life.

Every day, a steady stream of women cross the border from Uzbekistan to Kyrgyzstan. Demure and well-covered, few would guess that they are prostitutes in search of better conditions.

"While in Uzbekistan they wear long clothes, with headscarves totally covering their hair. They look like very religious girls," said rights activist Azimjan Askarov who has witnessed the traffic many times. "Once in Kyrgyzstan, they transform. They wear tight jeans and sweaters, their working clothes."

The rise of prostitution in Uzbekistan has coincided with a severe economic crisis. "People are practically starving there, that is what drives Uzbek girls on to the street," said Bahadyr Abdullaev, a businessman from the Kyrgyz town of Jalalabad who makes frequent trips across the border.

Once they have joined the sex trade, Uzbek women are then attracted by the higher earnings and a more stable currency over the border in Kyrgyzstan. For a night's work in Andijan, a large Uzbek regional centre, an Uzbek prostitute can earn 1500 to 2000 sums, between 1.2 and 1.5 US dollars. Over the border in the Kyrgyz city of Osh, she could earn 1000 to 1500 soms, or 21 to 32 dollars, for the same amount of work.

Money is not the only attraction. Girls have long been selling their bodies in both countries according to 23-year-old prostitute Nazira from the Uzbek town of Khanabad. "The difference is that open soliciting is impossible in Uzbekistan," she said. "Religion has a stronger influence here. In Kyrgyzstan, people have a more accepting attitude towards prostitutes."

Captain Abdylda Erdolotov of the Jalalabad city police department estimates that around 20 per cent of all sex workers in the city are from Uzbekistan. "Uzbek women rent apartments here and after earning some money, they go home. Of course they don't admit to their real profession, their families think they are peddling goods at Kyrgyz markets," he said.

Even in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbek prostitutes fear running into members of their country's diaspora, so they tend not to work on the streets, preferring saunas and hotels.

But life is not all rosy in Kyrgyzstan. Uzbek prostitutes are more vulnerable than their Kyrgyz counterparts, according to local pimp Manzura K. "The police target visiting prostitutes. They can't charge local prostitutes with anything, but as the Uzbek girls are living here without registering, they can demand bribes from them," he said.

Fear of exposure prevents Uzbek prostitutes from seeking treatment for venereal disease. "They are afraid that their identities will be taken at the hospital and passed on to the police, who will then stop them from working in Kyrgyzstan in the future," said Razilya Danikulova, a lawyer with the Ayalzat (Womanhood) NGO. "So they don't seek treatment and keep working until the disease develops to a serious level."

Jalalabad now has one of the highest rates of sexually transmitted diseases in Kyrgyzstan, according to the Centre for fighting AIDS.

With the onset of spring, the flow of sex workers from neighbouring Uzbekistan is expected to increase. Jalalabad journalist Jalil Saparov is one of the many Kyrgyz worried about the republic's new image. "Liberal attitudes and a weak legal framework on this issue is making Kyrgyzstan the sex capital of the Fergana valley region," he said, adding that many fear moral decay within will be mirrored by a declining international image.

Ulugbek Babakulov is an independent Kyrgyz journalist.

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