

## **Lost Children of Central Asia**

**Author:** IWPR

On the murky underside of Central Asia, there are underage prostitutes for sale on the streets with few rights and fewer opportunities.

Child prostitutes may be virtually invisible in the Central Asia republics, but they are there if you look hard enough – in discreet clubs, private homes converted into brothels, and hanging around on street corners.

In a wide-ranging investigation conducted in four of the five countries – Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan – IWPR discovered that teenage girls are bought and sold as commodities, and in some cases shipped off to become sex slaves in the Gulf.

A high premium is placed on virginity, but the average price of sex with a minor ranged between one and 10 US dollars. Some of the worst cases involve parents selling their own daughters for gain or out of sheer desperation.

Mostly girls aged between 11 and 16 – although many start earlier, and some boys are involved, too – these adolescent children are very much the victims of the tumultuous changes these countries have undergone since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Many come from impoverished rural families left unable to cope by years of economic decline. Others, from broken homes or abusive family environments, have fallen through a social safety-net worn thin by lack of government spending.

All four countries covered by this report categorically outlaw sex before the age of consent, 16, and any adult involved with a minor would face a lengthy spell in jail. Prostitution is not criminalised in these states, but living off a prostitute and coercing a minor are. So there are legal mechanisms that can be used to target those who exploit child prostitutes.

While some argue that the legislation is incomplete, the main problem seems to be enforcement. IWPR heard reports of corruption in both the judiciary and the police. In addition, where law-enforcement agencies are doing their best to protect minors in the sex trade, they are often badly under-resourced.

The trade in underage prostitutes is also the reverse side of a process of liberalisation of some aspects of personal life, leading to what some observers see as a crisis in traditional ethical standards in the face of the worst laissez-faire attitudes imported from the West.

Across Central Asia, IWPR contributors went to places frequented by prostitutes and spoke to young people involved in the trade, as well as pimps, police, doctors, human rights groups, and others familiar with this hidden world.

There were many recurring themes in the stories IWPR was told, suggesting that what we heard was a fair reflection of the situation. We were unable to conduct this research in Turkmenistan.

### TRACKING THE CHILD PROSTITUTES

One way to look at the problem is through official eyes. But the weakness of state infrastructure, the lack of adequate law and policing and the secretive nature of the child sex industry means this picture is

necessarily incomplete.

Instead, IWPR set out to find and interview the prostitutes and their pimps.

We started in Kyrgyzstan, a small country where prostitution has become big business. It's estimated that the trade - mostly adults but also including minors - has an annual turnover of at least three million US dollars in the capital Bishkek alone. Newspapers in cities across the country are filled with advertisements offering the services of female escorts, either at the client's home or at a sauna. This is the top end of the market, and some of these escort agencies specialise in very young girls, targeting a clientele of wealthy men who would not go to a streetwalker.

For any outsider visiting Bishkek, or indeed any other capital in the region, the immediate image of prostitution would be the heavily made-up women sitting around in hotel bars.

But this group of fairly visible prostitutes - often targeting rich foreigners - are unlikely to include minors. Instead, the children are hidden away from view.

In the southern city of Jalalabad, the local human rights group Spravedlivost (Justice) directed IWPR towards places where underage prostitutes hang out. Prices charged by the girls vary according to location. One site, near the Mir cinema, is regarded as the cheapest place - the girls here are less in demand because they may be older, or losing their looks because of alcohol problems, and ask for just 15 or 20 soms (30-40 cents) for sex.

IWPR found Malysh - "Baby" - touting for business near a market, and paid 150 soms for an hour of her time to interview her.

Malysh said she had been in the "business" since she was 12, and told a story of neglect and abuse which we would hear again and again. "There were eight of us with our mum, our dad died, and we were constantly short of food," she said. "Then I got a stepfather, who tried to rape me when I was eight... I ran away."

Fatima runs a brothel in her home in Jalalabad, hiring what she calls her "chickens" out to a set of regular clients. She says it's easy to find new girls, and claims she doesn't pressure them to start working for her, "Why abduct them, beat them, lock them up or trick them into it? It's easier to pick up some beggars at the market, clean them up and pay them a small amount."

Other underage prostitutes can be found at saunas in Jalalabad, though it's often hard to guess that they are 13 or 14 as they are heavily made up.

In the other big city of south Kyrgyzstan, Osh, we were told that fewer underage prostitutes are visible on the street than four years ago because the authorities have made it harder for offenders to bribe the police and courts. The trade has gone underground, with the trade in boys the most concealed.

An IWPR contributor went to the Almaz bar, where local residents testified to IWPR that they had seen parents bringing their own sons and daughters to sell their services. Many witnesses recalled hearing one teenage girl screaming, "I don't want to! Let me go!"

But an evening spent at the bar proved fruitless. A border guard from the local airport told us why. "In a

big city, it's hard for a stranger to find an organised firm making money off minors – they won't let you get close, because they won't trust you. Go to the smaller towns, where there are many people unemployed," he said.

We took his advice to go to Kyzylkia, a town of 25,000 that saw a steep decline after the break up of the Soviet Union because the coal mines that once supported it were closed. Most working-age people are unemployed, getting by as best they can.

The check-in clerk at a local hotel – who had been “recommended” by our border guard acquaintance – offered to supply adult prostitutes almost immediately the IWPR contributor booked in. She then sent him on to a small shop, and gave him a password which, when he went there, produced an offer of adolescent girls, day or night.

To get a better picture of what was on offer in the city, the contributor – presenting himself as a scrap metal merchant in town on business - hired a taxi driver to help organise some “leisure activities”.

The driver first took him to an outwardly typical apartment block, where all the apartments leading off one entrance were apparently being used as brothels. A knock at the first door produced a teenage boy who turned them away, saying, “All the girls are busy today.” On the second floor, the girl who opened the door told them that the “girls only work here, they don't do visits”. A floor up, the door opened to a girl of about 14 who asked them to come in. But the contributor declined, hearing drunken voices from inside.

There was also a strong smell of petrol, which the taxi driver explained was used as an intoxicant by adolescent girls, “They pour some petrol into a plastic bag and then sniff it for pleasure.”

Next stop on this tour of Osh was a roadside café frequented by a crowd of teenagers. One of them – Madina, who is now 16 – agreed to be interviewed about her life as a prostitute in return for 350 soms.

She described how her regular clients include police officers, and local officials who employ her when important visitors are in town. “I have accompanied the judge to picnics in the mountains several times,” said Madina. “My friend came with me - she was with the prosecutor - and some police officers came with us. They had their automatics with them and they even let me do some shooting.”

Minors are for sale in secret brothels in other Central Asian republics, too. In Kazakstan, parliamentary deputy Erasyl Abylkasymov told IWPR of the growing problem, “People of that particular sexual orientation go there [to brothels]. In [the capital] Astana alone, I've heard there are two or three such clubs, and there are five or six in Almaty. They have started to appear in other cities, too.”

Other girls simply work the streets. According to Kazak police records, about one in three streetwalkers are underage. Most come from poor or otherwise disadvantaged families or rural areas where unemployment is rampant.

In Tajikistan –the poorest country in a poor region – prostitution again takes both visible and hidden forms. In the capital Dushanbe, underage girls ply their trade at the bustling city markets, where ready cash is always changing hands. A city police officer, who asked to remain anonymous, told IWPR how market traders pay with goods worth five or six somoni – about two dollars – for sex with the girls. “It suits them to use underage prostitutes, since they get the least trouble with them. Usually they do the business in public toilets, on building sites or in abandoned buildings,” said the police officer.

Other minors are recruited to work in brothels. In one well-publicised case, a madam calling herself Mama

Rosa was jailed in 2001 for running a large-scale operation out of a nine-storey apartment block that she bought especially for the purpose in a suburb of Khujand, the main city in northern Tajikistan. It is estimated that between 60 and 140 women and underage girls worked for Mama Rosa – real name Tursunoy Abdujalilova – over a period of five years.

The court case revealed that Mama Rosa had been supplied with new recruits by local police officers.

Information on the situation in Uzbekistan is harder to come by, since officials are reluctant to show up their country in a bad light. In addition, conservative social attitudes according to which men and women are not expected to deviate from the roles expected of them, make it hard to openly discuss sensitive matters like the abuse of children.

What is clear is that underage prostitution exists in the major cities. Alisher Akbarov, a professor of medicine in the capital Tashkent, said he had seen cases but he was keen to stress these were exceptional. “The percentage of minors in the sex industry is still not very large, as it is a criminal offence. Or else they are very much underground,” he said, adding that the problem was shared by all former Soviet states.

The Centre for Democratic Initiatives in Samarkand, in the west of the country, has files on cases where underage girls have been tricked into prostitution. Most of them come from impoverished backgrounds. If they go back home, their parents rarely if ever report the pimps to the police for fear of the stigma that would surround them.

## STARTING OUT

Central Asia is a region where family ties are traditionally strong, and both society and regional governments take a dim view of prostitution – all the more so when minors are involved. So how is it that 11- and 12-year-old girls are ending up on the street?

Part of the reason is economic – all these countries experienced major downturns after the Soviet Union broke up, and unemployment became a major problem for the first time. Simultaneously, the state-funded services and benefits that provided a basic safety-net for vulnerable parts of the community were badly eroded by the collapse of government revenues.

Family problems including poverty, neglect and sexual abuse play a large part. Gulnara Kurmanova, who chairs the board of Tais Plus, a Kyrgyz non-government organisation, NGO, which helps prostitutes and focuses on HIV/AIDs protection, believes this is the most significant factor. “The level of earnings in the family is unimportant – much more significant is how the girl is treated at home,” she told IWPR. “It is the girls who have no parents, or whose parents have become heavy drinkers, who end up on the street. The child’s upbringing is left for an aunt or a grandmother who has neither the energy nor the desire to look after it.”

Other experts report cases of abuse within the family, where 11- to 13-year-old girls are subject to sexual advances from older male relatives. The child feels unable to tell anyone, and runs away from home.

In many cases the child has such a difficult start in life that the outcome seems inevitable. Kristina, 13, lives in Osh. Raised by a prostitute with alcohol problems, she was drinking vodka at nine years of age and is now working the streets.

Some experts see declining moral standards in a changing society as a major contributory factor. “The loss

of morality in a society where there is no Komsomol [Communist youth league], no ideological organisation to guide young people as in Soviet times, has changed fundamental values and priorities," said Vladimir Tyupin, head of the Oasis Foundation for Youth Protection and Cooperation.

According to Ilya Savchenko, a Bishkek-based psychologist specialising in adolescent problems, paedophilia has always existed in Central Asia, but was kept firmly in the background. The unwritten law, he said, was, "Do anything what you want as long as no one sees it."

Savchenko believes the change came with the liberalisation that followed the collapse of the USSR, "This phenomenon existed in Soviet times as well, but it became more open after the republic became independent. Democracy, in which cheap porn movies became available and a gutter press appeared, has considerably changed the relationships between men and women. The concepts of virginity and spiritual and moral purity were pushed into the background.

"All of us have come under the influence of western pseudo-culture, which promotes a sexually unrestrained way of life. So young people and adults have changed their belief systems after finding themselves in an ideological vacuum."

#### RECRUITMENT: FRIENDS AND PIMPS

In Kyrgyzstan, IWPR was told that pimps were especially keen on girls from poor or broken homes, because there was less likelihood anyone would kick up a fuss – even if their daughter was spirited out of the country. In some cases, the pimps pay the family a retainer to keep quiet.

In a number of instances reported to IWPR, girls from these vulnerable categories appeared to have been recruited without coercion. Even so there was often an element of deception – they were led to believe they could earn good money.

The Bishkek-based NGO, Action in Support of Families, told IWPR that most teenage sex workers are recruited in rural communities. In special "casting sessions", attended mostly by girls aged 15 to 17, the pimps tell them they will make more money in two weeks than their parents earn in a year.

They are told they will be able to return home in a few months, where no one will ever find out what they were up to in the city. The pimps also promise to arrange surgery to restore their virginity.

Many prostitutes were lured into becoming prostitutes by their friends. "Some girls in the trade are eager to get their friends involved as well, so they go around telling them how great their life is. We urge young girls not to believe those stories," said Fatima Alayarova, a senior social worker with the Child Protection Centre, which helps homeless and orphaned children in Bishkek. "But our attempts to reason with them do not always work. Youth and the desire for money prevail."

In some cases, girls are tricked into becoming prostitutes. A police officer in Osh told IWPR that adolescents are often offered a job waiting tables in a restaurant, or helping in a public bathhouse. When they discover the truth, it is often too late.

Others are so poor that they see no option but to sell their bodies to support themselves and sometimes their families. Often they join the steady flow of migrant labour from impoverished rural areas to the big cities.

In the Tajik capital, Dushanbe, most prostitutes fit this pattern. Many minors hail from backgrounds where violence and drug abuse are common.

Malika, 14, arrived in Dushanbe nearly a year ago, in spring 2003, from her home in the Hatlon region in the south of the country. Their father left five years ago to find work in Russia, and they never heard from him again. She and her 15-year-old brother ran away from home last spring, leaving their mother and six other siblings behind. "Our life was too hard. We had no food. My brother and I decided to go to the city to make some money. We just wanted to help our poor mother," she told IWPR.

Life in the city proved extremely difficult. Malika and her brother slept in stairwells and ate food from garbage cans. While her brother took to stealing food at the markets, Malika became a prostitute, making just about enough to buy food. But she has no plans to return home, saying it is still far worse there.

## VULNERABLE GROUPS

Children from orphanages are at high risk of going into prostitution. With few opportunities they become easy prey for pimps. According to Viktoria Ashirova of Ayol, a resource centre for women and family issues, in Uzbekistan "it is very easy to recruit, enslave and sell an orphan. No relatives will ever look for them. No one will care".

But sometimes it is parents who encourage or even force children to become prostitutes. A girl from Almaty in Kazakhstan who gave her name as Karlygash told IWPR, "I'm 15 now. Eighteen months ago my mother told me, 'I raised you, fed and clothed you. Now that I am out of work it's your turn to feed me. Since you have no skills, go and sell your body.' There are no jobs in the village I'm from, but my three younger brothers and sisters have to be fed somehow. So I have to work."

Twelve-year-old Katya has lived at the Child Adaptation and Rehabilitation Centre in Bishkek for three years. She has told teachers that her mother - now in prison for theft - let her partner abuse the child when she was only six, in exchange for a bottle of vodka.

Psychologists say that Katya has a "highly accelerated sexuality" and that she is trying to meet paedophiles.

Many of the older prostitutes whom IWPR met in the course of the investigation started out as children. A volunteer with the Tais Plus NGO introduced us to Jazgul, now 18, whose story was fairly typical.

Jazgul took a break from soliciting in downtown Bishkek to talk about her life. Lighting a cheap cigarette, she said, "I come from a small village in the Issyk-Kul region. My father died when I was 10 and my mother remarried. My stepfather treated me well at first, but when my mum gave birth to a boy, he refused to feed me anymore. They sent me to a neighbouring village to live with my grandparents. We were very poor. When I was 14, an older friend told me there was big money to be made every night in Bishkek, and urged me to try it."

The friend, who was five years older than Jazgul, became her first pimp. Her first clients were two truck drivers from Naryn. She was given a new skirt as a reward for her lost virginity.

"I walked the streets two days a week to make money to buy food. I brought the money back to my grandparents, and told them I had a job as a waitress. Pimps avoided me for some reason, fearing I was a police informant. I was on my own," she said.

Jazgul eventually went into the sex trade full-time when she was 17.

The young women she works with – most of them between 17 and 19 – recounted similar beginnings.

“I was raped when I was 11,” recalled Jazgul’s friend Nazira from Naryn. “I told my mother but instead of feeling sorry for me, she beat me up and sent me to Bishkek to live with my aunt.”

Nazira, then 13, says she was too ashamed of her shabby clothes to go to school, and took to riding around the city by public transport just to stay warm. It was on a trolleybus that she met her first pimp, Vera, who took her home, gave her food, and offered a job. “I knew what sex was all about, so I agreed,” she said.

She lived with Vera and – together with two other teenagers – worked for her for six months. Vera proved less exploitative than most, and split the earnings equally. While she drank her share away, the young girls bought chocolate and clothes.

Eventually, Vera was arrested, and the police sent Nazira back to her grandparents. But she found she could not resume her old lifestyle, “I had got so addicted to quick and easy cash that I had to go back to prostitution, and I’ve been doing it for five years now.”

#### HOW THE PIMPS OPERATE

Although some underage prostitutes may work on their own or in groups, most of the cases that IWPR came across involved adults who recruited and exploited them. The Tais Plus NGO has conducted a study which shows that all underage girls in Bishkek work for pimps.

The people involved are a very closed group – pimps working with adult prostitutes will have little to do with them. They are also careful to avoid flouting the law too publicly, for fear of being targeted for bribes as much as of a lengthy jail term.

In Bishkek, they charge about the same for underage prostitutes as for adult ones, 200 to 350 soms per hour (between four and eight dollars). “Despite the risk, pimps continue selling underage children because a child is easy to manage,” said Tais Plus staff member. “A child is easier to manipulate psychologically; it can be punished and won’t go complaining.”

The children tell stories of varying treatment by their pimps. Some provide what passes for good conditions – they feed them, buy them clothes, provide them with accommodation and pocket money, and bail them out of jail. Others treat them like slaves, making them work off any costs and giving them only food and provocative clothing.

Some of the pimps are teenagers themselves. The Spravedlivost group in Jalalabad showed IWPR video footage of Jan, a skinny 11-year-old prostitute with a boyish haircut, next to her pimp – 12-year-old Bahadir.

#### BOYS INVOLVED IN THE SEX TRADE

One of the more concealed aspects of what is anyway a secretive world is the existence of underage male

prostitutes.

Vladimir Tiupin of the Oasis foundation told IWPR that while the problem was not as widespread as underage female prostitution, he knew of several boys aged between 12 and 16 who were involved.

“They start by having sex with their peers out of curiosity or for fun. When they encounter adult partners, these boys realise they are in demand, so they start having sex for money,” he said.

Tiupin says the boys are sometimes drawn into blackmail schemes. “It’s a police tactic to set up big businessmen or government officials by introducing them to those boys. The boys have to cooperate with the police after they get caught committing some minor crime such as stealing or using drugs,” he said.

“They get invited to those people’s homes or saunas, meet their friends, and everything is recorded on video or photographed. Then the police use this evidence to extort money or privileges from those businessmen or officials. The record amount extorted this way was 3,000 dollars.”

## THE CLIENTS

IWPR contributors were unable to contact men who use underage prostitutes. Instead, we spoke to Aida, a female pimp in Osh, who told us about the kind of people who seek them out.

Often they are men with respectable jobs and family lives. Locals prefer young, inexperienced girls, says Aida, “There’s a lot who like ‘fresh ones’. They are mostly middle-aged men who’ve had their fill of life and are bored. Now they want a virgin, the bastards, and they want her to cry and be scared.”

Some clients are foreign, and if they prefer boys they are prepared to pay a premium.

Locals pay less. One 11-year-old-boy in Osh called Vova has been “in business” for five years. “Respectable-looking men simply take him behind the boiler-house in the yard of his house,” said an adult female prostitute who sees the boy frequently. “They mostly pay him with vodka and cigarettes. The boy is often seen drunk, begging people to give him a drink, or just lying somewhere.”

## THE TRADE IN CHILDREN

One of the most worrying aspects of child prostitution in Central Asia is the sale of children by their own parents. There are three gradations – in the first, a girl may be given away to some local man, even a relative, for a fee. This phenomenon is associated with extreme poverty in rural regions.

In some cases, the girl becomes a second or third wife. There is a tradition of polygamy in the region, although it is banned by law, but in these cases - because of the coercion of minors - the practice is closer to slavery than marriage.

Kulipa Musuralieva, a police lieutenant-colonel who heads the juvenile delinquency department at the Kyrgyz interior ministry, told IWPR that selling daughters for money is common in the Chonalai district, considered the poorest area in Kyrgyzstan. Parents sell off girls aged 11 to 13, sometimes to much older men, and use the payment to feed their younger children.

“These teenage wives never go to school, and, at risk of their lives, give birth very early, to weak babies,” said Musuralieva.

A doctor in Jalalabad, who asked to remain anonymous, told IWPR that in the south of Kyrgyzstan, relatives may simply hand over, rather than sell, an underage girl to a relative such as an uncle, cousin, or stepfather. Such cases generally remain a family secret and never reach the police, he said. They come to light very rarely, for example if an underage girl goes to see a doctor with health problems.

Second, there is a more commercial transaction where the child is sold to a professional pimp. Lieutenant-Colonel Musuralieva has seen a number of cases in her time. “In early 2003 we managed to stop a bad mother – to put it mildly – who was trying to sell her little daughter to Uzbekistan,” he said.

“Also, during a [police] raid in the very centre of Bishkek, next to the Central Department Store, we arrested a Russian woman who was trying to sell her child for 1,000 soms [about 22 dollars]. They get punished for this – and much more thoroughly than people who involve children in prostitution.”

Lieutenant Ulan Abdykadyrov, who is in charge of a halfway home for juvenile delinquents in Osh, recounted the case of Sivara, who been through the hands of four pimps. She was raped by a stranger in a cornfield at the age of nine. Her father subsequently sold her into prostitution.

A volunteer with the Podruga, an NGO running HIV/AIDs protection programmes in Kara-Suu, southern Kyrgyzstan, told IWPR that she personally knows two 14-year-old girls who are working at a local market. The NGO worker – who is a prostitute herself – said the mother of one of the girls has handed the girl over to a pimp for six months on a sort of “lease”, to earn enough to pay off her debts.

## SPIRITED AWAY ABROAD

Some girls are dispatched abroad, mainly to the Gulf states, for prostitution. IWPR identified cases in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

They are part of a bigger picture of sex trafficking from the former Soviet Union. While some women from Central Asia find themselves, like those from Moldova and Ukraine, in western Europe, many end up in the United Arab Emirates. Links between Central Asia and the Gulf, founded on legitimate import-export businesses, have burgeoned since the end of the Soviet Union, making the Arab states a natural destination for prostitutes.

As well as adults, minors are sent – using forged documents to conceal their age.

A Tajik businessman who has lived in the Emirates for several years told IWPR how the process works. Every stage of the journey, from recruiting or buying the girls in Tajikistan to getting them into the Gulf states with the requisite entry permits, is carefully worked out.

This informant, who asked not to be identified, said that most of the girls are tricked into believing they are going to a legitimate, well-paid job, although some are aware it involves prostitution.

The traffickers use contacts in government agencies to obtain fake documents. Laws in the Emirates

stipulate that women under 30 cannot enter the country unless accompanied by a close relative, so both underage girls and young adults need several years to be added to their age. A retired police officer in Kyrgyzstan said that theatrical make-up, and even egg-white to artificially age the skin, was often used to disguise the girls.

The costliest exercise is bribing officials at the Tajik border – who are unlikely to be fooled by the documentation – to look the other way. Once they arrive at their destination, the girls are turned over to a pimp, who may pass them on to others later.

According to the businessman, virgins and underage girls are the most prized commodity and will fetch high prices.

In Uzbekistan, an IWPR contributor met Mavluda, who sold her 15-year-old daughter to a wealthy buyer in the Gulf. She claims she did not coerce the girl. “Better to give my daughter to a rich sheikh for 5,000 dollars than lead a beggarly existence,” she maintained.

She accompanied her daughter to the Emirates, all expenses paid. Indian intermediaries arranged the deal. They went to the buyer’s “palace” and the girl underwent a medical examination to check that she was a virgin.

Mavluda says this kind of arrangement is still happening in Uzbekistan, “The prices have gone down, but the trade continues. These kinds of deals are regarded as good fortune for the girls.”

The Tashkent office of the International Organisation for Migration, IOM, reports that buyers in the Emirates will pay anything upwards of 500 dollars to deflower girls from Central Asia.

Nodira Karimova runs Future Generation, an anti-trafficking organization in Uzbekistan which tries to track down women who get trapped as sex slaves abroad. They get asked for help both by victims and their relatives. One case they dealt with was that of a girl from Samarkand sold by relatives after she was orphaned. A local pimp drugged her and flew her to the Emirates where for nearly a year she was forced to have sex with several men a day. She began losing her hair – possibly through stress – and was thrown out into the street, with no money or documents. Future Generation was alerted to her plight by an Uzbek woman living in the Emirates.

A study conducted by the IOM suggests that more than 4,000 women and girls – perhaps 400 of them minors – are trafficked abroad from Kyrgyzstan every year.

#### WHAT THE LAW SAYS – AND HOW IT WORKS

Sex with minors is illegal in all four Central Asian states covered by this report, but some believe the legislation is incomplete. Others argue that whatever the law may say, the problem is one of enforcement.

Under Kazak, Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Tajik laws, engaging in sex with a person under the age of 16 is a criminal offence punishable with a jail term. Oddly – in a region where the cultural norm is that sex is only permissible within marriage – there appears to be a slight mismatch between criminal and civil law, with marriage generally permitted only at 17 or 18 except in extenuating circumstances.

In addition, the Central Asian countries have other relevant legislation that can be applied to clamp down

on child prostitution, for example specific laws against corrupting minors (sometimes defined as 14 and under in this context), as well as general anti-prostitution legislation.

Working as a prostitute is not illegal in these countries, except in Kyrgyzstan where it is counted as a breach of “administrative law” rather than a crime. Nor is using the services of an adult female prostitute (rules on male homosexual acts vary – this is now legal in Kazakhstan but still banned in Uzbekistan). However, all four countries make it a criminal offence to live off immoral earnings by acting as pimp or keeping a brothel.

Almaz Esengeldiev, a lawyer with the Expert Service law firm in Bishkek, notes that Kyrgyz legislation does not contain specific provisions on child prostitution. At the moment, only prostitutes older than 16 – the age of legal liability – can be prosecuted. Esengeldiev himself opposes criminalising prostitution.

The government of Uzbekistan - in what may be an implicit recognition that there is a problem – recently pledged to sign an optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, covering the trafficking and prostitution of children, and paedophile pornography.

## POLICING

Enforcing the laws as they stand remains a challenge for the region’s police forces. Police lack the resources to deal with the problem – and alarmingly, a proportion of them are involved in taking kickbacks.

Kazakhstan’s interior ministry says it is making headway and that the number of minors involved in the sex trade across the country is steadily decreasing. “In 2003, there was a sharp fall of more than 40 per cent in the number of underage prostitutes detained for engaging in prostitution,” said Nelly Moiseeva, deputy head of the ministry’s department for juveniles. “Some 66 children were identified in nine months of 2002, and only 38 in the same period last year.”

For Kubanych Kudaiberdiev, a captain in the Kyrgyz police force, building a credible case is the problem. “It is hard to prove that a girl is a prostitute,” he said. “To do that, we need to see the actual monetary transaction take place, or get a statement from the client. In theory, that may sound quite realistic, but I have never seen it in all my experience.”

Lieutenant-Colonel Musuralieva says the challenge is not catching the criminals, but getting a prosecution through the courts successfully when the criminals may have friends in high places.

Her juvenile affairs department regularly teams up with criminal investigation officers to conduct raids, codenamed “Butterfly”, to catch both prostitutes and their pimps. “We keep on uncovering these case, but we’re unable to bring them to their logical conclusion,” she said. “For instance, two cases were filed against pimps this year, but both were dropped. They got help from people higher up, and the cases were closed. It’s likely that these pimps have got backing from some of our high-ranking [police] officers. I’m not afraid to say so.”

But even when cases do go to court, defendants can often afford good lawyers while the child prostitutes have no one prepared to take the witness stand for them. If they have parents or relatives, these will often refuse to testify against the pimps.

NGOs in Kyrgyzstan allege that corrupt police officers allow prostitution to continue because of the kickbacks they receive. Brothels are allowed to operate with impunity, and pimps pay the police regular protection money. In addition, police on patrol in Bishkek exact a toll on streetwalkers by stopping client’s

cars the moment a prostitute gets in. This is ostensibly to check documents and residence rights, which the girl will almost certainly lack since she is likely to be from the countryside. The man then has the choice of paying a fine or losing the girl.

## CONCLUSION

The outlook for this generation of vulnerable children – and future ones, too – seems bleak. Even as economies start recovering, growing inequalities may simply furnish more men in the cities with the means to buy their services, while leaving the rural communities from which they come further behind.

The sex trade has a firm grip on its victims, who cannot easily escape because there are so few opportunities for them. With HIV/AIDs on the increase in Central Asia, their lives will be more at risk than ever.

More efficient law enforcement, and a less corrupt police force would go a long way towards making life tougher for the pimps and traffickers. Kazakhstan has already claimed some success in stemming the trade, but its neighbours appear to be losing the battle for the moment.

This investigation was made possible by the support of Freedom House in Kyrgyzstan. All the names of minors were changed.

The investigation was conducted by Ulugbek Babakulov, Freedom House officer in Bishkek; Natalia Domagalskaya, a freelance journalist in Bishkek; Elena Lyanskaya, a Freedom House volunteer in Tashkent; Alla Pyatibratova, a freelance journalist in Osh; Roman Sadanov, the pseudonym for a journalist in Astana; Asel Sagynbaeva, IWPR's programme coordinator in Kyrgyzstan; Leila Saralaeva, a freelance journalist in Bishkek; and Nargis Zokirova, an IWPR contributor in Dushanbe.

**Location:** Central Asia  
Uzbekistan  
Turkmenistan  
Tajikistan  
**Focus:** Central Asia

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/lost-children-central-asia>