

North Caucasus Women Ply Secret Trade

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Cash-strapped young women reveal how they go abroad to earn money fleecing men at nightclubs. There are a lot of us - girls from Russia and the countries of the CIS," Svetlana told IWPR. "Our main job is to attract and entertain clients and persuade them to drink."

Svetlana has spent the last five years in Turkey where she has been earning an income from a profitable line of work that is attractive for cash-strapped young women from the North Caucasus but is virtually a taboo topic back home.

Club owners hire them for what is known in Russian as "konsumatsia", which could be translated as the artful fleecing of unsuspecting men. The girls ply them with alcohol to encourage them to spend their money. It is not prostitution - and therefore much more acceptable to a lot of Russian women who want to work abroad - but carries its own risks and problems.

"Sometimes the clients come on strong and you have to fight them off. There are cases when some girls decide to go further. As a rule, the owners of the establishments prohibit this (paid sex with clients) so these girls have to hide the extra money they earn," said Svetlana.

She said that she spent half her earnings on maintaining her appearance, "If you don't look good, clients will leave you for [another girl]. And I can't let that happen!"

The women are unwilling to talk about the down side of their profession, although it is clear that it can be difficult. Those that IWPR spoke to travel on tourist visas and therefore have a shadowy legal status abroad. They said that it can be alarming to deal with drunken men, some of whom get angry when they think they have been cheated, and employers who can sack you at any moment.

However, most of the women IWPR spoke to stressed that they did this work of their own free will and were glad of the chance to earn a decent income abroad.

Lawyer Fatima Batsezheva said that if the women did not engage in prostitution it was hard to prosecute them as they were doing nothing strictly illegal.

Nadya, who is also from Nalchik, has been earning a living from konsumatsia in Turkey since she gave up her studies.

"I was expelled from university and I was ashamed to ask my parents to spend money to get me re-admitted," she said. "A friend suggested I go abroad and work as a waitress. That's what I did at first, but there wasn't enough money in it.

"Turkish men think that all Russian girls are prostitutes. When I began to tell them that I am from the Caucasus and that for us that is a disgrace and that not all Russian girls are like that, that I am just a dancer, then they cooled off somewhat."

In Kabardino-Balkaria itself, some clubs and restaurants also hire women to earn money from their richer customers and visiting foreigners.

“They work as waitresses, sometimes even as cleaners,” said the owner of one restaurant in Nalchik, who did not want his name disclosed. “All the girls are young and attractive but we do not allow them to offer any sexual services.”

A police source told IWPR that they have had complaints from men who, once they sober up the after a night of being entertained by such girls, report to the police that they have been cheated - but officers do not take up their cases.

Few people like to talk openly about this topic. The women who travel abroad from the North Caucasus generally do not tell their loved ones how exactly they earn their money when away from home.

Elena plies this secret trade for nine months out of the year in Rome, unknown to her relatives, who believe that she has a job working in a jewellery shop in the Italian capital.

“I like it and I don’t intend to throw it in,” she told IWPR. “Generally these men just need someone to talk to. They pour out their worries to you; you just sit and nod and make suitable replies from time to time and you have it in the bag.

“After a few sessions you understand why there are so many girls doing this who come from Russia. The owners of the clubs used to try American and European women for this work but what western woman can sit for three hours and listen sympathetically to complaints about his dreadful wife or his boss?”

Larisa, a friend of Elena who works with her in Italy, told IWPR, “Of course my husband does not know what I do in Rome. But he is happy with the money that I bring home and doesn’t ask any more questions.”

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