Rich Pickings for Kyrgyz Prostitutes

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After years of hardship, sex workers are enjoying something of a boom.

The world’s oldest profession is thriving in Kyrgyzstan following the arrival of United States-led forces in the republic.

While spokespersons for the military coalition maintain that off-duty soldiers are forbidden from fraternising with local prostitutes, the girls themselves tell a very different story.

The troops - which have been based in the strategically-important republic since the US led its offensive against Afghanistan in winter 2001 - have been credited with boosting the local economy.

Companies supplying the Manas airbase, on the outskirts of the capital, where the overseas forces are billeted, have never had it so good.

And the same can be said for local prostitutes, who like everyone have been badly hit by the economic downturn over the last few years. Now, they’re earning a decent wage by offering their services to the western soldiers.

Girls who had to be content with a fee of around 12 dollars have seen their nightly earnings quadruple since the arrival of the foreign troops.

One sex worker told IWPR that she meets her western clients in a number of hotels in the capital. Her earnings are high by Kyrgyz standards - sometimes as much as 100 dollars a night - and even after her employer has taken his cut, she can take home between 200 and 500 dollars a month.

Olga Yun, chairperson of the Bishkek-based non-governmental organisation Tais Plus, the only group dedicated to providing free sexual health care and condoms to sex workers, told IWPR that of around 1,600 currently working in Kyrgyzstan around a quarter cater exclusively to foreign military personnel.

As well as paying well for services provided, the soldiers often give their favourite girls little gifts.

"On New Year's eve, the servicemen gave us a nice tip on top of our earnings by leaving 50 and 100 dollar bills under the Christmas tree for us," one girl told IWPR.

Yun said that this is a far cry from the bad old days, when prostitutes were at constant risk of picking up a client who then refused to pay, or would beat them when asked for money.

Homesickness leads many western servicemen to request English-speaking prostitutes. "Many of the military men need communication more than sex," claimed one Bishkek woman.

This has led to a rush for English lessons. Yun told IWPR that many girls who use the Tais Plus centre arrive
with phrasebooks, as they don't have the time or money to take an official language course.

The Manas military authorities insist coalition troops are forbidden from visiting prostitutes in Bishkek.

"It is completely out of question," said Elizabeth Orkiz, a public relations spokesperson at the airbase. "American military men know that they cannot do this and they will be held responsible for any infringement of army regulations. They are authorised to visit the city only for cultural events such as theatre, shopping and cinema - or for official visits."

Elena Buldakova is an independent journalist in Kyrgyzstan

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