

## **Shuttle Traders Risk All**

**Author:** [Gulnura Toralieva](#)

Kyrgyz women travel across the region to support their families, despite being bullied and harassed en route.

Corruption and violence complicate the lives of all those who take part in the tiring and dangerous business of travelling to Russia, China and beyond in order to buy and sell goods. But recently Kyrgyz women have begun to report a more worrying trend – the demand for sexual favours.

“On the way back from a recent trip to Russia, my passport was taken away, my hands were twisted, and I was insulted despite the fact that all my documents were okay. This is quite normal,” said one shuttle trader, who gave her name as Kalymkan.

“But then they told me that to get my passport back I had to pay them around 70 US dollars, or ‘offer myself’. I am not sure if people will understand my meaning, but I could not give them the money I had worked so hard to earn for my family. I wanted to be able to feed my two children.”

The shuttle trade emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, at a time when the Central Asian republics were struggling to adapt to their new-found independence, and remains one of the few options available to women in the current climate of poverty and high unemployment.

Political scientist Elmira Nogoibaeva said, “Back at that time everybody was lost. Many people did not know how to provide for their families. Many men just gave up – but women became accustomed to the new harsh conditions and went to the market places, which offered their only opportunity to survive. Despite the great physical effort involved in the job and the psychologically stressful situations it involves, women in our country have little choice but to enter the shuttle trade.”

Bubaisha Arstanbekova, president of the Akykat Jolu (Fair Way) organisation, which is engaged in the protection of the rights of labour immigrants and shuttle traders in the Commonwealth of Independent States and other countries, agrees.

“We women quickly adapt to difficult situations, and this is why we had to take charge of making a living for our families as the government does not care about us,” she said. “Every day we receive dozens of anonymous letters from female shuttle traders whose rights are being abused by those who believe they have a right to offend us, to pull our hair, sexually harass, confiscate our documents and blackmail us for their return.”

According to figures gathered by the Kyrgyz shuttle traders association, some 70 per cent of all traders are women, travelling routes to Russia, Kazakstan, Korea, Turkey, Pakistan, India, China, Poland, Italy and elsewhere. As a result, Akykat Jolu programme coordinator Saltanat Barakanova said these workers are classed as labour migrants because they “voluntarily and legally travel outside the territory of a resident country in a given state and temporarily stay at the territory of a given state with a purpose of temporary or permanent employment”. However, the shuttle traders association believes that as the traders are self-employed, this definition is inaccurate.

“Shuttle traders are engaged in intermediary trade activities funded by their own work,” said Barakanova. “The distinguishing peculiarity of this line of work is that neither local nor foreign governmental bodies carry the responsibility for shuttle traders’ salary payments or social security. These women run all the social and economic risks themselves.

“Our preliminary research has revealed a number of problems created by double taxation, flaws in intergovernmental agreements on customs and border systems, corruption, blackmail, psychological pressure, work and accommodation difficulties, and the absence of a single system for the goods delivery. Moreover, we do not have the right to vote, and we cannot get simple medical insurance or even temporary registration.”

Arstanbekova noted that the dangers faced by shuttle traders are exacerbated by their unclear legal status, and that this can have serious repercussions, “The major danger is that those women, shuttle traders, are not secure. If one of us gets lost in a foreign country, our embassies there will not know about it - and even if they hear of it, they will ignore it. Many times our people have asked us to help with the reinstatement of documents - for example, to replace a confiscated passport - and the embassy staff have said that such a thing is not in their remit.”

According to Bubaisha Gulsunova, who heads the Sezim crisis centre in Bishkek, the shuttle trade activity can also result in the break up of the family, “Many women engaged in this business have lost their

husbands and children because of the long period of time they are away. Their husbands find other women, and sometimes children are abandoned.”

In spite of these drawbacks, shuttle trading’s lack of educational barriers and of any age discrimination means that women are still entering the profession. Kubat Karimov, programme coordinator with the International Migration Organisation, said that Kyrgyzstan’s high unemployment was a strong factor in the decisions of many shuttle traders, “Very few women can find a job, and are not guaranteed a better chance at employment after their graduation from college. Their husbands, who are often unemployed themselves, become alcoholic or find alternative ways to get rid of the stress. Women realise that they cannot rely on the support of their husbands, and go abroad for shuttle trade to feed their children.”

Political scientist Nogoibaeva added, “The shuttle trade is a relatively profitable business, and this attracts unemployed women without higher education. Another thing is that the shuttle trade does not require specific skills or proficiency. This is why, despite the very high risk, women are prepared to do it.”

Gulnura Toralieva is an IWPR correspondent in Bishkek.

**Location:** China  
Turkey  
Stavropol  
Russia

**Focus:** The Women's Reporting & Dialogue Programme

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/shuttle-traders-risk-all>