Poverty is driving teenagers into the sex trade – and drug addiction is keeping them there.

Turkmenistan is facing a sexual health crisis as increasing numbers of young women move into prostitution in order to make a living in the poverty-stricken republic.

The drug abuse associated with prostitution, and lack of awareness about disease prevention – particularly with regard to HIV and AIDS infection - is leading analysts to voice grave concern.

Heroin smuggled from neighbouring Afghanistan, a major opium producer, has become easily available in Turkmenistan, and is increasingly linked with prostitution.

The sight of minors offering sex to feed their drugs habit is seen as symptomatic of the country’s many problems, and is particularly shocking in a society where conservative values have traditionally held firm.

Many families – which are often large here – are putting their younger daughters on the street in order to feed their other children.

There were always a few prostitutes in urban centres but what has changed is the numbers of people involved, the fact that many come from rural ethnic Turkmen backgrounds, and the fall in age of those involved.

On the streets of the capital Ashgabat, girls as young as 14 are now offering their services for as little as around one US dollar. Addicts often prefer to be paid in heroin rather than cash.

One young prostitute, who gave her name only as Amantach, told IWPR that she used to have a happy life with her family in eastern Turkmenistan, even though her father’s job at a collective farm only paid enough to cover their most basic needs.

“Then the glorious times of the ‘Golden Age’ came, and my father could no longer manage to feed our large family,” she said, in a bitter reference to the “Golden Age” of prosperity declared by Turkmenistan’s president, Saparmurad Niazov, better known as Turkmenbashi.

“We went hungry. And then a neighbour suggested to my father that he sell his daughter to visitors, and this money would help the family to make ends meet. Despair made my father agree to it. It happened once, and then again and again.

“However, it didn’t help our situation, so I had to move to the capital where there is more demand for women like me and the pay is better. I don’t keep the money I earn - I send it home for my brothers and sisters.”

Poverty is widespread in the capital as well as in the rural areas, as unemployment continues to rise. Deteriorating circumstances are driving women into prostitution in order to survive.
One Ashgabat woman, who gave her name only as Jamal, told IWPR how her life fell apart not long after the birth of her second child, “My husband lost his job, began to drink and then, like many of his friends, he became a drug addict. He sold everything of value in our house and refused to seek treatment.

“Meanwhile, I had two young children to care for. Once, when I was quarrelling with my husband, he said that I should go walk the streets to earn some money, and I soon realised that I had little choice.

“So now I overcome my disgust and go on the night shifts, and in the mornings I return to my sleeping children and doped-up husband. One day I will kill myself.”

Turkmenistan’s high unemployment rate and odd labour laws are also being blamed for driving many younger women into the oldest profession. Turkmen pupils graduate from high school when they are 16 years old, but they cannot go to university at this stage, as the state requires them to spend two years working in a factory first. But there are not enough jobs for skilled workers, let alone teenagers.

Marina recently left school and has been unable to find work. She drifted into prostitution as she felt there was no alternative. “I need the money,” she said frankly. “Sure, selling one’s body is not a very pleasant business, but at least now I have some cash.

“My parents have no idea what I am doing, as I told them that I am working at a night bar. Even if they suspected the truth, they wouldn’t be able to change the situation or offer any alternative, so they’d just have to put up with it.”

Drug use is rife among prostitutes, and is often used to ensnare vulnerable young women in the trade in the first place. Once addicted, a drug user will do anything to earn money for the next fix.

Observers say that barter – where drugs are exchanged for a girl’s services – is popular with visiting Iranians and Afghans.

It is estimated that an average seven out of every ten young prostitutes working in Ashgabat are addicted to heroin, including Jennet, who has been using the drug for two years.

“A friend and I used to smoke dope, but one day he offered me an injection, saying that the kicks were better than anything else. I tried it and liked it,” she said. “One day my friend told me he couldn’t afford to pay for any more heroin and I’d have to earn the money myself... by sleeping with one of his friends in exchange for a dose. I agreed to do so.

“That’s how my downfall began. I can no longer see a way back up.”

As well as the increased risk of HIV infection, the drug culture leads to higher crime in the areas where the prostitutes ply their trade. Drug dealers often set up shop in the same area, to the dismay of local residents.

One mother told IWPR that she had been forced to relocate her family after prostitutes and drug users moved in to the same apartment block as them.
“One flat in our block was rented out and used as a brothel, and before long another flat on the same floor was being used as a drugs den,” she said. “It was scary even to go into the entrance hall of the block, because someone might try to snatch your handbag or try to mug you for money to buy drugs. Those who had already bought their next dose of heroin would shoot up right there in the hallway.

“We were afraid to let our children go out alone, and as my oldest daughter grew up I became very worried about her living with such horrible neighbours. Finally, we had to exchange our flat and move to another district.”

While the lives of ordinary people are affected by prostitution and the associated rise in crime, observers note that the authorities do not appear to be taking the issue seriously.

An official from the health ministry, speaking on condition of anonymity, voiced concern about the official attitude towards prostitution and its implications for sexual health.

“Sexual exploitation of a 14-year-old minor is not regarded as a crime if there is no violence involved,” he said. “As a result of this attitude, it’s very difficult to estimate the scale of the problem. But it should not be hushed up or ignored, as the associated negative social phenomena – drug use, sexually transmitted diseases including AIDS – have serious implications for society.

“We cannot remain silent and pretend we don’t have problems that seriously harm citizens’ rights and destroy the moral foundations of our republic.”

Location: Turkmenistan
Afghanistan

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