

Uzbekistan: Police and Prostitutes in Unholy Alliance

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In order to survive, some prostitutes in the Fergana valley have joined in the fight against crime.

A preponderance of headscarves signals the strong presence of Islam across the Fergana valley - but this densely populated bastion of tradition has also become a centre for prostitution in Uzbekistan.

Official figures are said to underestimate the true number of women selling their bodies in the valley - there thought to be about 1000 - as only a minority have ended up in court.

In the city of Fergana, police records show that 86 women have been charged with prostitution, but an additional 200 were discharged as "women of easy virtue", which means they were not convicted of any crime.

This apparent laxity in such a conservative society may be explained by the claim of some Uzbek "working girls" that they are locked in a kind of unholy alliance with the police.

Dilfuza Juraeva, a prostitute living in the Altyaryk district of Fergana, claims that local prostitutes not only pay protection money to police, but are also deployed to defame wealthy, high-ranking or "troublesome" people.

"Like all prostitutes who work unhindered in the village of Khamza, every Monday I hand over [some] of my earnings to the Altyaryk police department," she said.

These allegations were laid out in a written statement to the provincial prosecutor's office, which also included claims that police officers used prostitutes to plant drugs on officials or wealthy people that they wanted set up.

Her statement elicited no official response, but Juraeva claims that a campaign of harassment soon ensued.

"The police won't leave me in peace," she said. "I have been beaten up and warned to leave the area, or I will be 'dealt with'."

Certainly, if the police were looking for ways to target high-ranking members of the urban elite, prostitution would be a good way.

Guzal's customer list contains numerous well-known local figures. "My clients are members of the regional and district governments, the prosecutor's office and the military. They pay to have a good time on the side with a young woman like me," she said.

Human rights activist Tukhtasyn Alijanov agrees that prostitutes working in the Fergana region have become a tool in the hands of law-enforcement agencies. "It has become quite commonplace for prostitutes to be used in acts of provocation," he told IWPR. "One good example is the meeting of

opposition parties held in Fergana, where members of the Erk party were beaten up by prostitutes."

Some prostitutes, however, say that they have voluntarily joined the fight against crime as part of an unwritten contract with the police who leave them alone in exchange for valuable information.

"Yes, we help the police. If we are suspicious of any of our clients, then we inform the police immediately. In return, we can work in peace, without worrying that we will be arrested and have criminal charges pressed against us," said Naima.

"The police see us as reliable informants," added a Fergana madam. "We tell them who our clients are, how much money they have and when they came to us. Criminal clients tell us everything when they get drunk, and we pass this on to the district police officer."

A law enforcement source confirmed that prostitutes have proven useful in detective work. "We caught a serial child killer in Fergana with the assistance of prostitutes, so it is clear that we do use their help," he told IWPR on the condition of anonymity.

Even if prostitutes have established some sort of compromise with the police, the shame and ostracism associated with prostitution continues unabated. Indeed, many women choose to work far away from home - travelling to Fergana from neighbouring provinces, or in the case of Fergana women, working in Andijan and Namangan provinces.

"The reason for this phenomenon is clear," said Arabbai Kadyrov, a human rights activist from Namangan. "Prostitution is on the increase, but the shame it brings has in no way diminished."

Some lead complicated double lives.

For two months, Barno has been working as a prostitute in Fergana, while her husband cares for their two children in Kuvusai. "My husband thinks I found a job in Fergana, he has no idea I am earning money through prostitution," she said.

Shakhida has become the sole breadwinner for her child and other members of her family, "I visit the bar every day. By selling my body, I provide for my family and ensure our financial security". Whether her family are aware of how she puts food on their table, she did not say.

Unlike many western countries where prostitution is often the result of social problems such as drug addiction, in traditional, conservative Uzbekistan it appears to be a direct consequence of poverty and unemployment.

"How can I condemn my fellow countrywomen for working as prostitutes, when it is very difficult to find work or to earn a living wage from one job?" asked Ismail Mallabaev from the Kirgul region. "Even for a job as a cleaner, you need to raise money for a bribe. This is why women sell their bodies."

Once they begin earning an estimated 10,000 to 25,000 sums a day (18-22 US dollars), many women find it difficult to imagine returning to subsistence wages. "I would be happy to find a good job, but there are none around. And I don't want to work for a monthly salary of 20,000 sums. That is no use for anything. So I continue like this, with no idea whose arms I will be in tomorrow, in whose arms I may die. God knows," said Shokhsanam Abdukhalilova from Andijan.

Others insist that their predicament is only temporary. "I still feel that everything lies ahead of me. I will set my daughter on her own two feet, then as soon as I find a decent man I will get married. I believe that my future will be good," said Manzura from the Kuvin district.

Such optimism is not totally misplaced, if Bonu, a madam from Fergana, is to be believed. She currently has two girls working for her, who give her 1,000 sums from every encounter and keep the remaining 1,000-4000 sums for themselves. But she says their predecessors have all enjoyed a life beyond prostitution. "I have helped nine girls to get married. They made good money working as prostitutes and I helped them to establish their own families," she said.

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