

Videoed Assaults Cause Outrage in Kyrgyzstan

Author: Altynai Myrzabekova

Women beaten on film as "lesson" to keep other female migrant workers in line.

A series of video clips in which ethnic Kyrgyz men living in Russia assault and humiliate women from their own country for allegedly "loose behaviour" has rung alarm-bells in the Central Asian state.

The first video that came to light in February showed a Kyrgyz woman called Sapargul standing half-naked amid men who were taunting and threatening her. The footage was shot on a mobile camera and posted on the internet. Media publicity around the case led to action by the Russian authorities.

Similar footage showing what may be copycat attacks has since appeared on the internet, once again filmed by the perpetrators with the clear intention of sending a message to other female migrants.

In Kyrgyzstan, women's rights groups are calling for concerted action to halt this disturbing new trend. Some believe that too many of their male compatriots quietly approve of tough action to control "their" women's behaviour abroad.

Half a million migrants from Kyrgyzstan work in Russia, according to figures from the International Labour Organisation. The exodus of female migrants is a growing trend, so that women now make an estimated 40 per cent of the total. In a traditionally male-dominated society, these women, unaccompanied and transplanted to a different social environment, are clearly seen as a threat by some men.

Sapargul was probably not the first victim of ritual humiliation caught on film, but she changed things by reporting the attack to Russian police in the city of Yekaterinburg.

Aida Kasymalieva of the Kyrgyz Service of RFE/RL, who broke the story, says that over the summer she saw two more videos that appeared to have been made after Sapargul's case became public.

Azat Berenaliev, the attaché at Kyrgyzstan's consulate in Yekaterinburg, told IWPR he knew of one other case that had led to a criminal investigation in the area he covers, the Ural region and Siberia.

"I can't say what the position is in other regions [of European Russia] for which the [Moscow] embassy is responsible, but it is likely that criminal cases have been launched there too," he added.

In Kyrgyzstan, interior ministry spokesman Bakyt Seyitov said there were at least five cases, including Sapargul's, where this kind of material had been posted on social networking sites or YouTube.

Sapargul's case prompted Russian police to launch a criminal investigation in July.

In media interviews, the 34-year-old said she was abducted by a group of men after they saw some Tajiks – also labour migrants – talking to her in a Yekaterinburg café. They bundled her into a car and drove her to a dark alley where she was subjected to the ordeal shown on film.

Russian police are still searching for the man who alleged to have led the group of about 15 who took part in the assault.

Berenaliev said the suspect was still in Russia. "We know who he is, and he is being tracked down. We are still hopeful that he will be caught," he said.

"As for the others, there's nothing I can say. We don't even know who they are, as Sapargul herself does not know them."

Berenaliev said the police hoped to identify the others once they detained the main suspect.

Two arrests have been made, but the men have been released on bail as police say they do not have enough evidence to hold them.

ATTACK ROUSES RIGHTS GROUPS TO ACTION

The Sapargul case sent shock-waves through Kyrgyzstan and prompted human rights groups to start raising public awareness about women working abroad and the real threats they face from their own community of fellow-migrants.

In August, they launched a campaign in which still photos of perpetrators taken from the video of the attack on Sapargul were placed on social networking sites, with an appeal to members of the public to

identify them.

The head of the Kylym Shamy human rights centre, Asisa Abdirasulova, said she and her colleagues felt something had to be done to stop the practice,

“We want these pseudo-patriots, these ‘saviours of the Kyrgyz nation’ as they call themselves, to stop humiliating Kyrgyz women,” she told IWPR.

Because the crimes shown on this and other video were committed in Russia, the role of the Kyrgyz authorities is limited to cooperating with investigations and responding to any extradition requests in relation to suspects believed to have returned to their home country.

Berenaliev said that in the cases where charges had been brought, tracking suspects down was necessarily complicated by the fact that two police forces – Russian and Kyrgyz – were operating within different legal systems.

Kyrgyz interior ministry spokesman Seyitov said the police force, which comes under his agency, was doing all it could.

“As the crime was committed on Russian territory, we are not interfering, as they are legally responsible for investigating it. But we are lending them our support and cooperation,” he said.

Before formal investigations can happen, such assaults have to be reported to the police. Migrant communities tend to be unfamiliar with Russian legal procedure and suspicious of the police, whom they may see as indifferent or downright hostile to Central Asians.

MISOGYNY ENDEMIC IN KYRGYZSTAN?

Human rights advocates and others who have followed the story worry that the attacks on camera may be just an extreme expression of more widely-held prejudices in Kyrgyzstan about women and what their “proper” role should be.

Kasymalieva said that when she interviewed members of the Kyrgyz migrant community in Russia while covering the Sapargul story, many said women like that deserved the treatment meted out to them.

“I was stunned by the reaction,” she said. “The overwhelming majority did not condemn those men, and said the girls were to blame themselves because they were frivolous, and they deserved it.”

Dinara Oshurakhunova, head of the Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society, said the same was true of many of the reactions she had come across in Kyrgyzstan.

“Most of the comments were in favour of it – approving the actions of those scum and saying yes, it was her [Sapargul’s] own fault,” Oshurakhunova said. “No one saw her as the victim of violence, they all saw her as the cause of it. She was the problem, not those lads.”

A more muted version of this prejudice is even more widespread – the argument that while such attacks are wrong, the female victims may be partly at fault.

A female member of Kyrgyzstan’s parliament suggested that for their own protection, women should be banned by law from travelling abroad to work until the age of 22. The bill was not passed.

A migrants’ group in Russia called Kyrgyz Yntymagy identified a number of assailants shown in video footage, but rather than inform the police, it attempted to engineer a “reconciliation” by getting the perpetrators to apologise. In one case, the group persuaded a perpetrator and his victim to get married.

At the Yekaterinburg consulate, Berenaliev said he was aware of victims coming under pressure not to go to the police and to reach an informal settlement. It became hard to prosecute such cases, he said, when victims either did not come forward or withdrew their statements half-way through the process.

Berenaliev said migrants were often keen to persuade victims to do things “the Kyrgyz way”, smoothing matters over and perhaps resolving them with a cash payment.

“We try to talk them out of it, telling them that they should not agree to it or give in to pressure. But we don’t always succeed,” he said.

Altynai Myrzabekova is an IWPR-trained journalist in Kyrgyzstan.

If you would like to comment or ask a question about this story, please contact our Central Asia editorial team at feedback.ca@iwpr.net.

Location: Kyrgyzstan

Topic: Women’s rights

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/videoed-assaults-cause-outrage-kyrgyzstan>