

Ensuring Russia's sex workers' rights essential for wider gender equality

Ensuring sex workers' rights was essential, not just for the workers themselves, but for any country's wider society, including public health.

By Ed Holt

IPS (27.04.2020) – <https://bit.ly/2YcVMuQ> – Despite seeing a shift in attitudes towards them in recent years, Russian sex workers say they continue to struggle with marginalisation and criminalisation which poses a danger to them and the wider public.

- Sex work is illegal in Russia and, historically, public attitudes to the women, and more recently men, involved in providing it have been predominantly negative, and often virulently hostile.
- This has led to them being marginalised and with little protection against violence and prejudice not just among the general public and clients, but also the police and wider justice system.
- However, they say they have seen a change in the last two to three years as some of their work campaigning for rights and awareness of their work, has begun to bear fruit in the last few years.

“Media have begun to talk and write much more about sex work. Much of this has been more positive to sex workers, ...and both their tone and rhetoric have become more tolerant,” Marina Avramenko of the Russian Forum of Sex Workers, which offers legal consultancy and support to sex workers, told IPS.

She added: “Sometimes media outlets conduct informal opinion polls about attitudes in society towards sex work and according to the results of these informal surveys, it is evident that more people have begun to talk about the need to allow sex work.”

- Sex work, which has been illegal in Russia since the Russian Federation was formed in 1991, is punishable both under criminal law and Russian civil offences legislation.
- Organising, or forcing someone into, prostitution, is a criminal offence carrying a penalty of up to eight years in jail. But sex work itself is a civil offence punishable by fines of up to 30 Euros.

Sex workers are one of the most marginalised groups in Russia today.

This is down in part to the influence of the Orthodox Church, which has grown in popularity in the decades since the fall of communism, on society and government policy. As with many other minority groups, such as the LGBTI community, sex workers have been demonised by the clergy.

Politicians also often publicly speak of sex workers in derogative or sometimes violently hostile terms.

“A negative attitude towards sex workers has been formed in society through propaganda and the Church. Sex workers are not recognised as a ‘social group’ and when people call for them to be killed or raped, or spread hate against them, they are not punished.

“False myths are also spread in society that sex workers destroy families, that they infect people with various diseases, and that sex workers are associated with organised crime,” said Avramenko.

Criminalisation itself also fuels this marginalisation.

International rights groups, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have repeatedly highlighted the effects of criminalisation of sex work.

They point out it often leaves sex workers with no protection from police, unable to report crimes against them during their work for fear of getting a criminal record, or having their earnings confiscated or their work reported to others.

This means that the perpetrators of the crimes against them know they can act with impunity, while police can also abuse, extort or physically and sexually assault them with equal impunity.

Indeed, this is often the case in Russia. According to the Russian Forum of Sex Workers, informal surveys have shown that in about 80 percent of police raids on brothels or independent sex workers' establishments, officers beat sex workers.

Some sex workers also recount horrific incidents they know of colleagues gang-raped by police, or held for days at police stations and beaten and starved.

"In general, police officers feel even more impunity than criminals and commit many crimes against sex workers," said Avramenko.

Because of this, sex workers seldom report crimes to police. And, even if they do, these are rarely, or poorly investigated.

Evgenia Maron of the Russian Forum of Sex Workers' Executive Committee, spoke to IPS about some of the cases which the group had been involved in, including that of sex worker from Gelendzhik who was raped. Investigators refused to initiate proceedings against her attacker on the grounds that "the applicant provides sexual services, which means that the perpetrator's actions are not socially dangerous".

He was eventually jailed for five years after Russia's Commissioner for Human Rights intervened.

In another case, a man filmed the robbery and rape of a sex worker in Ufa and forced his victim on camera to say that she was a prostitute as he was sure this would guarantee his impunity. He was eventually convicted but was sentenced to just over two years in jail and released immediately because he had already served that time in prison awaiting trial.

Sex workers also struggle to access lawyers. According to Maron, out of 250 cases where sex workers ended up in court under Administrative Code offences, only two were represented by lawyers in their hearings.

International rights and health organisations have also warned of the serious health threat posed by marginalisation of certain groups in society, including sex-workers.

Russia has one of the world's worst HIV epidemics with more than a million people infected and infection rates running higher than in sub-Saharan Africa. The epidemic has been driven largely by injection drug use but HIV is increasingly transmitted sexually and sex workers have been identified as particularly vulnerable.

A study published in 2016 by the Sex Workers' Rights Advocacy Network (SWAN) in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, showed more than a quarter of sex workers had faced physical or sexual violence by police officers and that police persecution deprived them of the opportunity to work in safe conditions, choose clients, or use condoms with every client.

But stigma and fear of their work being exposed mean sex workers struggle to access proper healthcare.

“Sex workers face obstacles in receiving medical care, primarily because there are very few special programs for them, and when they turn to state healthcare services, sex workers hide because of concerns about stigma that they are engaged in sex work,” said Maron.

Maron said that ensuring sex workers’ rights was essential, not just for the workers themselves, but for any country’s wider society, including public health.

“In the the event of violence, a sex worker cannot control the use of condoms, for example. Sex workers having greater guarantees of protection from violence, being able to file complaints with the police without obstacles, and rapists being punished to the fullest extent of the law will lead to positive health outcomes in the long run.

“It is violence that prevents necessary protection against STIs and other infections which have an important impact on public health,” she said.

In a few months a new version of Russia’s Administrative Code, which governs civil law offences, is due to be approved by lawmakers.

During its drafting phase Russian rights organisations and sex

worker groups campaigned to have penalties for sex work stripped from the new version of the code.

The fines are officially recorded in an Interior Ministry database and employers running background checks on job applicants will often reject those they see have fines for sex work. There have also been reported incidents of the children of sex workers being refused access to higher education or employment in the public sector after these records have been found.

“[Having] prostitution as an offence destroys all opportunities for [these] women in their future lives,” Irina Maslova, director of the Silver Rose sex workers’ rights movement, was quoted as saying in the Kommersant newspaper in March.

The calls were ignored and relevant articles in the current code on sex work will remain in the new code.

Many rights groups say that the work undertaken by groups like the Russian Sex Workers Forum to try and guarantee sex workers’ rights is essential to ensuring wider gender equality.

In a 2017 report, the Global Network of Sex Work Projects argued that “ultimately, there can be no gender equality if sex workers’ human rights are not fully recognised and protected”.

The group said: “Sex workers’ rights activists, feminist allies and human rights advocates have long held that the agency of sex workers must be recognised and protected, that all aspects of sex work should be decriminalised, and that sex work should be recognised as work and regulated under existing labour frameworks.

“Given that the majority of sex workers are women and many come from LGBT communities, protecting sex workers’ rights is imperative to achieving gender equality as defined under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)”.

According to a policy brief on sexual health and rights by Women Deliver, an international organisation advocating around the world for gender equality and the health and rights of girls and women, “policies that address the often tenuous legal positions of sex workers should ensure that they are not further victimised by laws that could potentially lead to incarceration”.

“Sex workers are often forced to live and work on the margins of society due to the criminalisation and stigmatisation of their work; this provides them with little possibility for legal recourse if they experience any kind of gender-based violence. Strong legal and policy frameworks must include provisions that reflect the complete and diverse experiences and challenges women face in order to truly provide comprehensive protection of women’s sexual health and rights,” Women Deliver state.

Meanwhile, Russians sex workers continue to call for decriminalisation, although, Avramenko argues, it will only help to a certain extent.

“By itself, decriminalisation will not change much,” said Avramenko, citing the experience of sex workers in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan where sex work is decriminalised.

“There, sex work is not punishable, but the police and the state are constantly finding ways to violate sex workers’ rights,” she said.

She added decriminalisation needed to be accompanied by greater public awareness of sex work and its benefits for society as well as rooting out police corruption.

It appears unlikely this will happen any time soon with the church continuing to wield significant influence over political policy and public opinion, and the recent lack of change to civil law offences for sex work.

Maron said that for activists like her there was little they could do than carry on their work.

“We will continue to try to improve access to healthcare and justice for sex workers and open dialogue about what sex work is and what interaction with a sex worker means for wider

society,” she said.

Their work does seem to be having some effect though, as the change in media reporting and surveys showing a more positive public attitude to sex work suggest.

“This is down to our work,” said Avramenko.

The Syrian women and girls sold into sexual slavery in Lebanon

Syria’s refugee crisis has shone a light on sex trafficking in Lebanon, where victims are often treated as criminals.

By Daniela Sala

Al Jazeera (11..02.2020) – <https://bit.ly/2uLjXUU> – “How do I know most of the women working as prostitutes are controlled?” asked Paul, a volunteer for the Jesuits, a religious order of the Roman Catholic Church, before answering his own question. “[Because] the last time I tried to help one of them get in touch with an NGO, I got beaten and threatened by her captors.”

Everyone in Lebanon's "sex trade" seems to be involved in trafficking in one way or another: Sources at both the Internal Security Forces (ISF) and the General Directorate of General Security (GS) in Beirut told Al Jazeera that even pimps working further down the chain of command ultimately report to a bigger network of organised traffickers.

Paul has learned the ins-and-outs of Lebanon's trafficking world over the years. Beirut, the Lebanese capital, and Jounieh, a coastal town about 10km (6.2 miles) north of it, are where most victims of sex trafficking end up in Lebanon.

A GS officer estimated that there are at least 800 women and girls who have been forced into prostitution in these areas. But the numbers are hard to verify because of the hidden nature of the problem.

While the ISF formally identified 29 victims – 10 of whom were Lebanese and 13 Syrian – of sex trafficking in 2017, the most recent year for which there is data, other sources, including officers at the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and NGOs, put the number in the thousands.

The law

The plight of these women is compounded by the way the law is applied in Lebanon. Article 523 of the Lebanese Penal Code criminalises "any person who practices secret prostitution or facilitates it". The punishment is a prison sentence of

anything from a month to a year.

It is not illegal to work as a licensed prostitute but seeing as the government has not issued any such licences since the 1970s, those working as prostitutes are vulnerable to being arrested and punished.

Beirut is no stranger to the sex industry. Prostitution was legalised in Lebanon after World War I when the government decided that concentrating prostitutes in one area – Mutanabbi Street, which became Beirut's downtown red-light district before it was destroyed in the Civil War – would protect Lebanese women from French and Senegalese soldiers.

According to the Lebanese Prostitution Law of 1931, brothels were divided into two groups: public brothels and escort houses. The law also set conditions for those working outside the brothels, dividing them into groups of workers; cafe girls, mistresses and "artistes".

After Lebanon's Civil War, which lasted from 1975 to 1990, secret – meaning unlicensed – prostitution became a crime.

But hundreds of women enter Lebanon each year, particularly from Eastern Europe and Morocco, with an "artiste" visa, to work as dancers in clubs. "Artiste" is widely understood to be a euphemism for "prostitute".

Life on the streets

It is about 8pm on a Saturday, close to the Daoura intersection near Bourj Hammoud in Beirut's Armenian district, on a crowded road full of busy shops and cafes. From his car, Paul has just spotted a woman leaning towards a black SUV. She and the driver talk for a few minutes. Eventually, she gets in the car. The transaction is quick, and people passing by do not even seem to notice.

"They found a deal," explains Paul's wife, Ray. The couple, both in their 40s, have been volunteering for the church for years. Paul first got involved 20 years ago when he discovered that one of his neighbours was being forced into prostitution. He says he considered it his "Christian mission" to help. Ray decided to join him soon after they met in 2010.

Paul and Ray are Armenian-Lebanese and asked that their real names be withheld because of the sensitivity of their work. For the past 10 years, they have distributed food and medicine once a week to "people in need", the couple's term for the homeless, drug addicts, beggars and women exploited into prostitution in Beirut.

As they drive around Doura, in the eastern suburbs of Beirut, the main road is still crowded. Two policemen are patrolling the area. But right around the corner, Ray spots another woman sitting in a car with a man. They have seen her here before, waiting on the street corner.

"We meet women who are Lebanese, East Africans and, in recent years, a lot of Syrians, of course," says Paul. "In my

experience, they all want to leave the job, but the only ones I have seen leaving a trafficker – it was because they were handed to another [trafficker].”

The Chez Maurice case

It came as no great shock to Paul when, in 2016, news broke that 75 Syrian women had been trafficked and held captive in a Jounieh brothel for years.

What became known as the “Chez Maurice case”, after the brothel in which they were held, only came to light because four women managed to escape.

Legal Agenda, a Lebanese NGO that collected several testimonies from survivors of the Chez Maurice brothel, described the place as a “torture chamber”.

“I didn’t think there was a state [law and order] in Lebanon,” one of the trafficked women told Legal Agenda. “[One of the traffickers] told me that he bought the state with his money. I believed him the moment I was detained in the General Security building for 24 hours and then released scot-free.”

Despite the media uproar surrounding the case, the owner of the brothel, a Lebanese businessman, was soon released on bail. Hearings into the case have been postponed multiple times and, three years on, the trial is only just about to begin.

'No trust in the system'

In 2011, the US State Department had placed Lebanon on its tier 2 watchlist of countries not fully complying with standards to combat human trafficking. Following pressure from civil groups such as Legal Agenda, Lebanon passed a new anti-trafficking law.

Since then, however, the Syrian crisis has precipitated a mass influx into Lebanon. Many of the refugees are women and children who have already suffered trauma and may be particularly vulnerable to exploitation.

Al Jazeera heard accounts of several scenarios in which Syrian women and children ended up in the hands of traffickers. One involved marriages, either in Syria or Lebanon, where the "husband" later revealed himself to be a trafficker. Another involved groups of women and children being trafficked across the border. There are also cases of women and girls being forcibly recruited within refugee camps or even sold by their families to traffickers.

However they arrived in Lebanon, human rights groups and aid workers say not enough is being done to protect them. Ghada Jabbour, head of the anti-trafficking unit at NGO Kafa ("enough" in Arabic), which focuses on gender-based violence, explains: "There is no trust in the system. Victims do not ask for help and do not report. And, at the same time, there is no outreach programme for the victims."

When the numbers do not add up

According to Lebanon's ISF, the number of identified victims of trafficking – including those forced into begging, labour exploitation and prostitution – has remained steadily low: 19 in 2015, 87 in 2016 (mainly the Chez Maurice survivors) and 54 in 2017. Most were Syrian.

However, Dima Haddad, programme officer at the IOM, says the official statistics do not come close to conveying the magnitude of the problem.

From her office at the IOM headquarters in Beirut, she coordinates a regional taskforce to counter human trafficking in Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey and Jordan – the countries most affected by the Syrian refugee crisis. Sitting at her desk, surrounded by charts showing the dozens of tasks her team has planned for the next few months, she says: “Wherever there is a crisis, there is human trafficking.

“Vulnerability is increasing, hence trafficking is increasing.”

Asked whether there are gaps in the system for identifying the victims, Haddad answers immediately. “Absolutely. If I have to be more diplomatic, I would say there is a lot of work to do. It is urgent, as we consider anti-trafficking a life-saving intervention.”

There are also great obstacles to women being able to tell their stories. Aside from the shame and stigma that prevent victims from coming forward, it can also be difficult to access them. Approaching women on the street is dangerous – as Paul has found over the years – as they are watched by their traffickers.

In researching this feature, Al Jazeera tried to speak to survivors through NGOs, local journalists and local refugee camp leaders. However, those who were prepared to speak asked for money in exchange, requests that appeared to come from husbands and other relatives. Permission to access Baabda female prison – where many of the women arrested for prostitution are held – was not granted.

Falling through the cracks

During 2017, the ISF adopted a policy of trying to root out all cases involving potential trafficking victims through its Human Rights Unit. As of 2018, at least 108 training sessions had been given to the 37 law enforcement agents attached to the unit to help them identify and deal with suspected trafficking cases. But, according to Alef, a human rights watchdog based in Beirut, and other organisations, these training sessions are rarely given to those on the front lines and are, therefore, missing their target.

Ashraf Rifi, who served as minister of justice between 2014 and 2016, and who was ISF director-general from 2005 to 2013, says it could take 10 to 15 years before there are significant

changes in how cases of human, and specifically sex, trafficking are identified and combatted.

“It is a cultural problem,” he explains in his office, referring to the low numbers of women – and particularly Syrian women – identified as victims of trafficking. “It’s not unusual, because of stigma and discrimination, that Syrian women are considered ‘just’ prostitutes.”

The ISF is also responsible for investigations into exploitation networks. And yet, Rifi adds, one of the main challenges is the “high level of corruption”, including within the ISF itself.

In August 2018, the head of the ISF’s Human Trafficking and Moral Protection Bureau, Johnny Haddad, was arrested on charges of corruption in connection with a prostitution ring. To date, he is still under investigation by the ISF’s ethics committee, meaning that all information related to the case is classified.

Meanwhile, hundreds of women continue to fall through the cracks – treated like criminals instead of victims.

In 2016, 304 women were arrested on charges of prostitution, according to the ISF’s data. More than half of them were Syrian. All were placed in prison.

The only support available to these women after they are

released comes from charities. Dar Al Amal, a local NGO, helps women recuperate in its sparse offices in Sin el Fil, in the eastern suburbs of Beirut.

Here, the volunteers provide emotional and practical support to women who were forced into prostitution, trying to address their legal, medical and psychological needs.

Ghinwa Younes, a social worker who regularly visits the Baabda women's prison, says: "All the women I met want to quit this life. Most of them are in fact trafficking victims – but ISF did not understand they were victims. As soon as they leave the prison, they rarely get any kind of support and they are immediately back in the network of their exploiters."

When Al Jazeera spoke to Joseph Mousallem, a spokesman for the ISF, he acknowledged that the difference between prostitution and trafficking is not well understood by police officers. "But it is a cultural issue involving the whole of society, not only the security forces," he says.

"Countering trafficking is a priority, but we do have thousands of priorities: the whole system is under pressure. We do our best, but not have the means or the resources to track the victims."

'Of course they are victims'

Lawyer Hasna Abdulreda meets dozens of these women during

detention visits. For 10 years, she has provided legal support to women in jail, and she is currently the head of the legal department at the Lebanese Centre for Human Rights, a local NGO.

“In the past five years, every month at least two or three [women] reach out to me, after being arrested as prostitutes,” she says. “Most of them are Syrians and, of course, they are victims of trafficking.”

But there is little she can do.

“The trials are very fast and if the judge is given any reason to think that the woman is consenting to prostitution (for example because she keeps a share of the money), then he will just send her to prison without any further investigation,” Abdulreda explains.

This is despite the fact that both the UN Convention on Human Trafficking and Lebanese law state that the victim’s consent should be considered irrelevant.

“The only thing I can do is to give [detained women] my phone number and ask them to call me once they leave so that I can refer them to a shelter or an NGO. In prison, they do not have a phone, so I can’t contact them once they are released,” Abdulreda adds.

Despite many women asking for help, in 10 years nobody has

called back.

For Syrian women, it is more complicated. Because they are foreigners, they are held by the GS for up to two days after being released from Baabda, Abdulreda says.

“I’m not allowed to access their files. I just lose every contact with them.”

‘Double standard’

Even when trafficking cases go to court, the odds appear stacked against victims of sex trafficking.

Legal Agenda analysed the 34 trafficking cases that made it to court in Lebanon between 2012 and 2017. According to lawyer Ghida Frangieh, who put that report together: “There is a clear double standard in the judges’ attitude towards prostitution and begging.

“While in all cases involving forced begging, judges were quite fast in ruling that it was a trafficking case, when it comes to prostitution, they were digging deeper into the means of exploitation, asking for proof that the woman was actually forced into it. In certain cases they ruled that the woman was not to be considered a victim of trafficking as she consented, at least to some extent.”

Frangieh says that as well as reflecting a general prejudice

against women in prostitution, this view has also been influenced by the Chez Maurice case.

“[Chez Maurice] became the victim paradigm. If you do not fit into this stereotype, you are hardly considered as a victim of trafficking,” she explains.

But this is not how trafficking works.

According to a former senior GS officer, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to speak to the media, sex trafficking generally happens in one of two ways: through highly organised rings operating in brothels (such as Chez Maurice) or through so-called “free agents”.

But, despite their name, free agents still operate under the protection and control of a trafficker. “There is no prostitution that is not linked to the main traffickers,” the former officer says.

‘Long-term solutions’

“Alone, we cannot do much,” says Jabbour from Kafa.

Along with the Catholic NGO network Caritas, Kafa runs a shelter for female survivors of violence, mainly domestic workers who have been abused by their employers. The ISF

occasionally refers trafficking victims to them.

But their resources are limited: Since 2015, Kafa has been able to offer protection to approximately 100 women, 20 of whom (all Syrians) were sex-trafficking survivors.

“These shelters are just a starting point,” says Jabbour. “What we need are long-term solutions.”

Some of these women were relocated overseas, some got married, but others, without a proper support mechanism, simply went back into prostitution – either forced or out of desperation.

“Countering trafficking and identifying victims is something that cannot be done by NGOs. It is a state’s responsibility,” says George Ghali, director of Alef.

According to Ghali, the problem is not the law but rather in the implementation of the law. “Where are the investigations? We are talking about organised crime. This is not something you can expect NGOs to deal with.”

Back in Doura, Paul and Ray keep providing basic help to people in need. They do not have success stories to share.

Paul says he has not received any further threats from the

traffickers. “[Why? Because] we make no change in the situation. And even if a girl manages to quit, they would have another one.”

He admits that lately, he has considered stopping his volunteer work because of the emotional toll it has taken.

INDIA: Young girls abused in south Indian temple rituals – rights commission

Rituals involve the girls being dressed as brides and then having their dresses removed “virtually leaving them naked”

By Anuradha Nagaraj

Thomas Reuters Foundation (26.09.2017) – <http://tmsnrt.rs/2xWemtY> – The practice of keeping young girls in village temples to be worshipped as goddesses as part of rituals in south India amounts to abuse and slavery, the national rights commission said.

The rituals in which girls are dressed as brides and then “their dresses are removed, virtually leaving them naked” is a form of the banned devadasi system, the National Human Rights Commission said in a report published on Monday.

Practised in the southern states of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh and parts of western India, the devadasi system, which “dedicates” girls to a life of sex work in the name of religion, continues despite being outlawed in 1988.

“They are denied to live with their families and have education. They are forced to live in Mathamma temples, deemed to be ... public property and face sexual exploitation,” the commission said in a statement.

The report was referring to a 15-day festival in parts of Tamil Nadu, which concluded on Tuesday, where local goddesses are worshipped and seven young girls are chosen by the community to stay in the temple.

The state government has denied accusations of abuse.

“Our child protection team has visited the temple in question and parents are there to take care of the girls,” said K Veera Raghava Rao, the administrative head of Madurai district in Tamil Nadu.

“These are 200 year old traditions that are practised in many village temples across the region. We have not found any case of abuse and our officials are monitoring the functions. We have asked them to cover the girls with a shawl.”

But campaigners said that in the name of tradition, hundreds of girls between the ages of seven and 10 years are made to stay in the temple premises during the festivities.

These girls, or Mathammas as they are referred to in parts of Tamil Nadu, are then forbidden to marry and must earn their living by dancing at the Hindu temples.

In some cases young girls being initiated into the practice have to be bare-chested with only garlands and jewels covering them, while in others they are made to carry pots of liquor as part of the celebrations, child rights campaigners added.

“As you travel through the region, the names keep changing, but the fact is that women are being forced into prostitution in the name of rituals,” said Priyamvada Mohan Singh, a criminology professor who carried out a survey in 2016 on the

devadasi tradition for the Indian government.

“The tradition exists in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra. We have documented many cases during our research.”

The National Human Rights Commission said the practices violated the children’s rights and asked both the Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh governments to respond in four weeks.

Additional information: NHRC notice to the Governments of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh over allegations of continuance of Davadasi system like offering of girls to Goddess Mathamma (25.09.2017)

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INDIA: The Indian caste where wives are forced into sex work

For girls and women from the Perna caste, entering the sex trade is a normal next step after marriage and childbirth.



Pic via: <http://bit.ly/2fCTxfb>

By Maya Prabhu

Al Jazeera (28.11.2016) – <http://bit.ly/2fCTxfb> – When Sita* comes home in the morning, her husband is usually still asleep. She has worked through the night, selling sex on the highways tracing Delhi's periphery, but she will bathe, cook breakfast, and get the children ready for school before getting some rest herself.

Here, in a tumble-down corner of Najafgarh, a patch of urban villages stitched into the Indian capital's fraying hem, what

Sita does for a living is no secret. Sita belongs to Perna caste, and among the women and girls of this acutely marginalised community, entering the sex trade is a usual next step after marriage and childbirth.

“My first child died shortly after being born. When [my second-born] daughter was around one year, that’s when I started this work,” she says. Married in her mid-teens to a Perna man she hadn’t met before, she estimates that she was 17 when she became the sole earner in her young family.

Now in what she guesses to be her late 20s, Sita still leaves the Perna basti (settlement), each night with other women from the community to tout for customers in “random places”: bus stops, lay-bys and parks far from their own neighbourhood and out of view of the police. They travel in a group, sharing the rickshaw fare and the risk of assault.

“We try to get it done quickly,” Sita explains. They conduct encounters in cars or hidden outdoor nooks. While one woman is with a client, a friend will make sure to stay within shouting distance. Each client pays between 200 rupees and 300 rupees (\$3-\$4.50). In a night, the women can expect to make as much as 1,000 rupees (\$14.60), or as little as nothing.

‘Born into poverty’

Leela*, a mother of four in her late 30s, has known since she was “very little” that her community was engaged in what is termed “intergenerational prostitution”. Unlike Sita and many

others, she only entered the sex trade when she was widowed, and moved back to Dharampura locality in Najafgarh, her childhood home.

For her, it was the natural path for a woman looking for work: her own mother died young, but she remembers that her aunties used to “go out at night”.

Husbands herded goats, or didn't work at all. “I don't know why. You can say it is the traditional way,” she says. But it is less a ritual than a remedy for an inherited economic need. “This work is our compromise. It's our way to make a living,” Leela explains.

“A Perna woman is born into poverty, into a marginalised caste, and she's female – so she's already thrice oppressed,” says Ruchira Gupta, the founder of the anti-trafficking NGO Apne Aap, which has been working with the Najafgarh Perna community for more than five years.

“As soon as she gains puberty, she is married, and after the first child, the husband pimps his wife. And she can't resist – she only has this community. She feels she has no path of escape. She is consumed for eight or 10 years, and then she is asked to put her daughter into prostitution.”

Gupta explains that girls who resist prostitution are often physically abused by their in-laws, who expect their son's wife to contribute to the family finances. Leela's own daughter – now a stay-at-home mum living elsewhere in

Najafgarh – moved back in with Leela for a short period to flee her new family's pressure to start sex work.

"They were threatening her, 'We will tear your clothes, we will put you on the streets naked,'" Leela says.

With Apne Aap's backing, she was able to convince an informal community court that her daughter should be allowed to make the choice independently. But one NGO worker explains: "We don't often meet women as courageous as [Leela]."

Sita pre-empts suggestions that her husband or in-laws pressure her into the work she does, saying: "It's my own choice," and pointing out that recently, her husband has found regular work as a driver and earns at least as much as she does.

But even in the absence of coercion, choice is a fraught concept in a community which is not only economically and socially marginalised, but historically excluded from the rights and freedoms of citizenship.

An historic disadvantage

Zoom out from this small community at the edge of India's capital, and the Pernas become just one dot among many thousands, scattered on the map of what a 2008 government-commissioned report described as "the most vulnerable and disadvantaged sections of Indian society".

These are the DNTs, or Denotified and Nomadic Tribes of India, who are still more commonly recognised in mainstream society under their colonial-era classification: the Criminal Tribes.

Historically itinerant traders, entertainers, and folk-craft practitioners, DNT communities are often compared with the Roma in Europe. Like “gypsies” elsewhere in the world, whose lifestyles made them difficult to bring under state control, the wanderers were regarded with suspicion by India’s British rulers.

After the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, a raft of castes were “notified”, that is, branded “hereditary criminals”, alienated from traditional sources of income, and made vulnerable to a range of state-sanctioned abuses.

Following India’s independence in 1947, the stigmatised tribes were “denotified”, but these communities have been unable to shake what academic Meena Radhakrishna calls their “historic disadvantage”.

Welfare programmes have been offered to the most marginalised communities – those social groups classed as the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Tribes (STs).

But even officially eligible DNT communities, such as the Pernas, who are recognised as “SC”, often do not gain access to these opportunities.

“It is difficult for these people to stake a claim to the government programmes because of the stigma of being labelled as ex-criminal tribes,” says Subir Rana, an anthropologist who has spent time among the Pernas of Najafgarh.

Not only has their past taught the community to be wary of the state, but their alienation from mainstream society has meant many of them are ignorant of their rights.

For example, getting a caste certificate – the necessary proof of eligibility for benefits – is difficult when many community members hold barely any government identification of any kind.

When Apne Aap began a campaign for improved documentation, only four or five individuals in the Perna community had certification of their “SC” status. With NGO intervention, this number has swollen into the 30s – but, workers say, it has been a struggle.

“Government always tries its level best to reach these people,” says BK Prasad, Member-Secretary of the temporary National Commission for Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes, “but even these people have to come to the government. Most of the time, these people do not come.”

He recognises that DNTs may require “a special approach”.

An earlier DNT commission, responsible for the 2008 report, issued a slew of suggestions for government, centring on the recommendation to address the needs of DNTs separately from other disadvantaged social groups. Upon release the report was, in the words of civil servant and consultant to the commission Pooran Singh, “put into the almirah [closet]”.

The new Commission is making a priority of addressing a deep information gap: at this point there is zero reliable, countrywide demographic information on denotified communities, a state of affairs which gives credence to Rana’s sense that “they have become the lowest of the low; they are invisibles”.

While the first order of business is the creation of a comprehensive list of DNT communities, the ultimate goal, according to Prasad, is that “they should be mainstreamed into society in a way that is not too much of a change for them”.

Mainstreaming will be a trickier proposition for DNT communities that have found their way into the sex trade. “Once you become associated with a trade like this, it is very hard to integrate,” says Anuja Agrawal, a sociologist who has studied DNT communities involved in intergenerational sex work.

“Giving up [sex work] happens only when a very concerted effort is made; when other opportunities then become available.”

First signs of change

Back in Najafgarh I speak to a young woman from the Sapera caste, a DNT community traditionally involved in snake-charming and wedding-drumming, who describes the stigma that follows her Perna neighbours.

She has nothing bad to say about them, she explains. “It’s

their occupation. How will they survive without it?" But, she concedes, "general caste [non-DNT] people get angry that they do such kind of 'wrong work'."

Apne Aap's field workers report that Pernas are ignored, avoided and barred from certain shops.

Prasad's proposal is to remove young girls from their familial contexts: "If we can wean children away, get them admitted to [state] residential schools – because beyond a certain age, slowly, slowly, they will follow their parents. Children imbibe what is happening around [them]."

He adds: "This change will happen slowly. It is true that everyone who is educated up to high school does not get a job." He estimates that if 10 percent try for a new sort of life, perhaps 2 percent will succeed.

This mirrors Ruchira Gupta's approach.

Now 14, Leela's younger daughter is on one of several Apne Aap scholarships to a private boarding school. She has already progressed further in her education than anyone else in her family. Her classmates don't know much about her background but they know what's relevant: she's bright, and a really good dancer.

I meet her when she is home for a weekend. She is a gazelle of a girl, as nice as Leela, with a gently teasing sense of humour she practises on me, in English, over WhatsApp. Unlike her mother, who never went to school, or her older sister who dropped out to become a wife, she won't marry until she's in her 20s, Leela says.

"My daughter says when she gets a job, we'll go away," says Leela. For her family, it's the first glimpse of an alternative path.

Leela's children – the schoolgirl and the housewife – are not

the only signs of a gradually broadening field of options.

Nowadays, Sita tells me, it's becoming normal to send your daughters to school: "That's the first stage."

**Names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.*

Other reading: India: 6% girls experience harassment before age 10, 41% before age 19

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