

Amnesty International Highlights Russia's Prostitution Problem

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Prostitution is considered one of the most shameful vices — as a result, both criminals and police officers consider abuse of sex workers normal.

Amnesty International adopted a resolution on Aug. 11 stating that prostitution should be decriminalized all over the world. The resolution, passed by the International Council Meeting (ICM), did not lead to any policy changes in Russia, where prostitution is a punishable offense, but consequent media attention has highlighted the plight of sex workers, one of the most vulnerable social groups in the country.

“There are 3 million of us [sex workers in Russia] — deprived of any rights, humiliated, outlawed by the state — and that's where all the problems start,” Irina Maslova, leader of the Silver Rose association of sex workers, told Vesti.ru news website on Aug. 13, in reference to the initiative.

Under the Russian Administrative Code a person who supplies sex services in exchange for

money is subject to a fine of between 1,500 and 2,000 rubles (\$21–\$29). In 2014 more than 9,000 fines were imposed, according to official court statistics published on the website of the judicial department of the Supreme court. Organizing a prostitution ring is a criminal offense punishable by up to five years in prison.

Prostitution is also condemned by society and is considered one of the most shameful vices — as a result, both criminals and police officers consider abuse of sex workers normal. Most victims are women, who are unable to defend themselves against their attackers.

Amnesty International stipulates that decriminalizing prostitution does not mean it would become legal, but that it would require police officers to treat sex workers with greater respect.

In Russia, opinions on the matter differ. Human rights activists claimed decriminalization would help, while some sex workers admitted that the article in the Administrative Code can prove useful, since it is sometimes the only thing preventing women from entering this dangerous profession.

Extortion Instead of Protection

Activists and lawyers devoted to advocating sex workers' rights agree on one thing: police abuse is a serious problem faced by prostitutes in Russia.

“Adding an article [criminalizing prostitution] to the Administrative Code lets policemen rob, kill, rape and extort [prostitutes],” said Maslova, cited by the Afisha Gorod news website last month. “This small administrative article made it possible for the authorities to treat a lot of women, men and transgender people harshly,” she added.

Sex workers often encounter extortion in exchange for having prostitution charges dropped. Few are concerned by the relatively small fine — they fear having a criminal record in law enforcement databases and relevant legal papers being sent to their official home addresses, where their parents or relatives live, Igor Danilov, a lawyer who often represents sex workers, told The Moscow Times on Wednesday.

“These women have husbands and families, they have normal lives,” and they do not want their loved ones to discover they have resorted to prostitution, he said in a phone interview. Police officers exceed their authority not just by extorting money, stealing possessions and beating sex workers, but they sometimes bully the women — just for fun.

“I had a case in which a policemen took a woman's cell phone, found her husband's number and called him, saying his wife was a prostitute,” Danilov said. He pointed out that almost every police encounter involves some form of abuse for sex workers.

It is not uncommon for sex workers to be threatened with heavier charges. “I was threatened with article 241 [of the Criminal Code that incriminates organizing a prostitution ring] ... [Police] are extorting money from me, I paid them off once and they left, but now they're trying to make me pay every month,” Pain, an online forum participant on the Silver Rose website, wrote.

As if the threat of criminal charges weren't frightening enough, police officers often resort to physical violence toward sex workers, and when this happens, other police officers refuse to intervene, said Vika Begalskaya, an artist from St. Petersburg and an activist who works with prostitutes on various art-projects.

"In July a transgender sex worker Julia came to me and asked for help," Begalskaya told The Moscow Times. "Julia's meeting with a client ended up in a police station. Three police officers were beating her up one by one." Afterwards they threw her out on the street, she said in a phone interview on Monday.

Julia lodged a complaint with the police, but no one took her seriously and no case was opened against the policemen, Begalska said. "Right now sex workers — especially transgenders — are a category that our society considers fine to beat and kill. They are completely deprived of their rights," she added.

Decriminalization is Remedy

Both Begalskaya and Maslova believe that the decriminalization of prostitution would prevent police officers from abusing sex workers. It is a stepping stone toward the legalization of prostitution, Begalskaya said — they must first be free of such abuse.

There is a significant difference between decriminalizing prostitution and legalizing it, explains Amnesty International in a statement on its website, and legalization might only make it worse.

"If sex services are decriminalized, sex workers would not be committing a crime while providing them," the statement says. "To legalize sex services, the state has to adopt certain laws and policies that will regulate it," thus, the danger that sex workers could face persecution for not complying with those policies remains, Amnesty International claims.

"Decriminalization places greater control into the hands of sex workers to operate independently, self-organize in informal cooperatives and control their own working environments in a way that legalization often does not," said Amnesty International.

When society no longer considers sex workers criminals and treating them as such, the statement emphasizes, police will stop aggressive behavior toward them and begin providing them with the necessary protection.

The lawyer Danilov agrees — if prostitution is not a crime, policemen will have no legal reasons to deal with sex workers and, therefore, no reasons to abuse them.

"Right now [police] treat them like they're hardened criminals, like they're not humans," he said. "In addition to that they're often sure they will go unpunished, and [they know that] girls can't stand up to them," Danilov added.

There Are Bigger Problems

Decriminalizing prostitution will not solve the bigger problems sex workers have to deal with, a blogger who claims to be a former prostitute and goes by the pseudonym Yekaterina Bezymyannaya, or Prostitutka Ket, told The Moscow Times. "This business wrecks your life

and mentality,” she said Monday.

That it is presently a punishable offense keeps many women from entering the business, which is not a bad thing, she said.

Bezmyannaya, 33, says she left the sex industry two years ago and claims that unavoidable confrontation with police is the least of a prostitute's problems.

“It's peanuts compared to what a client can do. People are different — some are normal, but some think that a woman who sells her body has hit rock bottom and deserves to be treated as such. Decriminalizing won't help here. The mentality should be changed,” the former sex worker said.

But in general, she believes that sex workers have the same rights as everyone else.

“Sex workers have passports, can buy an apartment, get a loan at the bank, get married. ... While I was working [as a prostitute], I didn't feel deprived of any rights. Except for one thing — I couldn't speak openly about what I do,” because criminalized or not criminalized, prostitution has always been and always will be an activity condemned by society, Bezmyannaya said.

Despair or Easy Money?

Most women become prostitutes because of the allure of easy money, Bezmyannaya believes. “The percentage of those who become prostitutes out of desperation is really small,” she told The Moscow Times.

“It's the desire to make money without making an effort [that drives women to prostitution]. I'm like that, too. There are women who would rather work as janitors, but will never sell themselves, and there are women like me and my colleagues,” Bezmyannaya said.

Begalskaya, the St. Petersburg activist, partially agreed with her. “Money does attract women to the sex industry, but it is not easy money. The job affects them psychologically a great deal,” she told The Moscow Times.

It is very hard for a long-term sex worker to escape the business and find another job, Begalskaya added.

Moreover, many prostitutes suffer from drug or alcohol addiction, she pointed out, and their only goal is acquiring their next fix. This category of sex workers is the most vulnerable. “They don't think about their own safety and the safety of the sex they're having,” she said.

Little Hope Ahead

Begalskaya doubts the situation can change anytime soon — according to her, society's mentality should change first. “Right now we divide all people into two categories — black and white. Those who don't fall into the white category automatically go to the black one and become outcasts,” she said.

Amnesty International's initiative is not the first to propose decriminalizing prostitution in

Russia. More than 10 years ago Russian lawmakers introduced a bill to the State Duma that would have legalized prostitution in the country, but it failed to pass the first reading.

Sergei Nikitin, head of the Amnesty International office in Russia, told The Moscow Times on Monday that he had no information about the organization reaching out to Russian authorities about decriminalizing prostitution.

“I'm not sure Russia will make the list of countries the organization will first pay attention to [regarding the issue of prostitution],” he said in e-mailed comments.

State Duma deputy Yevgeny Fyodorov condemned the initiative as “fascist.”

“It runs counter to our traditions. People suggesting it are going against the very human genome. They are destroyers and liquidators. Fascists in their essence,” Fyodorov, a member of the ruling United Russia party, was cited by Govorit Moskva radio station as saying earlier this month.

Pressure on sex workers has increased lately, said Danilov. “[Police raiding sex workers] wasn't that common before — maybe there has been a order to do it, or they've just learned to do it for better figures in their reports,” he told The Moscow Times.

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