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The Problem of Human Trafficking in Azerbaijan

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The problem of human trafficking plays a significant role in migration flows from Azerbaijan. It was first addressed at the beginning of the early 1990s. The mass unemployment that followed the collapse of the USSR and the Karabakh conflict with Armenia led to the emergence of informal “slave markets” in the centre of the capital city, Baku, in the mid-1990s (in Azeri “gyl bazari”). These were gathering places for unemployed men, mostly refugees and internally displaced persons, who were prepared to take up any jobs, including jobs that involved forms of enslavement. At that time, a number of publications appeared in the national media documenting the trafficking of men, as well as women and children, from Azerbaijan, for the purposes of forced labour and enslavement (Yunusov, 194). However, such occurrences were perceived as an inevitable consequence of the unresolved Karabakh conflict and of “temporary” economic and social turmoil. Most importantly, these were of episodic character and so, did not attract much attention.

The socio-economic situation in the country continued to deteriorate, and this had a certain impact on women. In the late 1990s, the four male “slave markets” in the capital were joined by a fifth “female slave market” (in Azeri “gadin gyl bazar”). The market was located in the centre of the capital and, so, immediately attracted the attention of journalists who dedicated many essays to the theme of “female slaves” of post-Soviet Azerbaijan, prepared to take up any job or activity for money.

As a result, young Azeri women gradually began to replace men in migrant flows from the country. From 1997, young Azeri women began to attract the attention of many national marriage agencies, as well as employment agencies recruiting individuals for employment abroad. These agencies fraudulently brought women into Western European countries, where these women were, upon arrival, divested of their passports and where they were forced into prostitution in brothels, strip clubs and other such places.

However, human trafficking to Europe did not play an obviously important role. Basically, Azeri women preferred to go voluntarily, or were sent fraudulently, to the Muslim East. From the late 1990s onwards, reports about Azerbaijani women who were illegally engaged in prostitution in Turkey, the UAE, Syria, Iran and occasionally Pakistan, came more and more frequently from Muslim countries in connection with Azeri citizens. According to the data from the Baku IOM office, the Azeri media reported that in 1990-1999, 750 Azeri women were deported from Turkey for prostitution, of whom 650 – or 87% – were deported between 1996 and 1999. In 2001, the number was 550. The UAE alone deported 900 Azeri prostitutes from 2001 until April 2003. According to some other reports, in 1999 the Turkish authorities counted 6,000 Azeri women engaged in prostitution, and the UAE reported that 2,000 Azeri females were involved in prostitution (Mamedov; Deported; Trade; Seyidbeyli).

Subsequently, the media constantly reported cases of the deportation of Azeri women from Eastern countries. Here, the geographical scope of trafficking expanded considerably. However, it was evident that the majority of Azeri women were trafficked for sexual exploitation to Turkey, the UAE, Iran, India, Jordan, Egypt and Indonesia. The biggest share of reports on arrests and deportations of Azeri women came from these countries. According to the numerous non-governmental organizations dealing with human trafficking, approximately 1,000 females are fraudulently trafficked or sent to work as prostitutes from Azerbaijan every year (Aleksperov).

Azeri citizens’ journeys abroad for slavery became so common that local NGOs even adopted a special term for illegal female prostitutes who travelled or were fraudulently taken out of the country to work abroad: “exit prostitution.” New tendencies have also emerged: a growing number of men are becoming victims of trafficking. According to the Republican Ministry of Interior, in 2006, 86% of trafficking victims were women, 3.5% were children, and the remaining 10.5% were men. Azeri men were fraudulently exported and used as slaves by private firms or enterprises (Myasnikov).

According to the Azeri Women’s Crisis Centre (WCC), from November 2001 until January 1, 2008, 8,734 women appealed to the WCC for help. Of these, 182 (2.1%) were victims of human trafficking or relatives of victims. Over 70% of these victims were women aged 18 to 40. Most of

them had a fairly high level of education: over 36% had higher or incomplete higher education; 21% had specialized secondary education. Almost 30% of the victims of human trafficking were unmarried women, 27% were married, and the rest were divorced or widowed.

Regionally, every fourth victim of trafficking is from Baku. Baku is followed in importance by: the cities of Sumgayit, Ganja, Mingachevir and Shemaxa (descending order); the border regions with Iran (Lankaran and Masalli); and the Gazakh and Sheki regions, which border on neighbouring Georgia.

The victims of trafficking, in interviews with WCC members, explain how, in addition to socio-economic factors (unemployment, poverty, the need to feed their children and old parents), patriarchal despotism plays its role. Approximately 47% of victims of human trafficking have regularly suffered from domestic violence from a parent of their husband or from the husband himself. 18% of these victims had been raped. The particularity of Azerbaijan is that the vast majority of cases (95%) of sexual abuse of future victims of trafficking were committed by close relatives. It is also noteworthy that half of victims were recruited by someone they knew. In most cases, the recruiters were other women: friends or neighbours.

In addition, half of these victims of human trafficking (49%) went to another country in the hope of obtaining a good income there. More than a quarter had hoped to receive education, or to marry, or to stay permanently, expecting better prospects for themselves there than in their home country. 17% of victims of trafficking believed that they would find employment corresponding to their training. Over 32% were willing to work in the services (as dancers, waitresses, saleswomen, housekeepers). 49% had no idea about their future employment, and only a 6% were mentally prepared to work in the sex industry without reservations (Yunusov, 196-197).

According to the survey conducted by the NGO "Clean World", in 2005, almost 15% of 243 respondents-victims of trafficking occurred as a result of actions of the close relatives of future victims of human trafficking. This was particularly true in Nakhchivan. However, most often, especially in the capital, the recruiters were female strangers (almost 35%, if we include the activities of women in refugee camps), or victims fell prey to the activity of various specialized firms and agencies (16.5%).

Nearly half (47%) left the country or were taken out of the country through the international airport in Baku. Other channels were also used: some left through the border city Nakhchevan, where they were kept in special houses close to the Turkish border until a certain number of women were recruited. Then, with the tacit support of Azeri customs officers and border guards, they legally crossed the borders in automobiles and entered Turkey. Since 2000, the transportation of women to Turkey via Georgia has been increasingly common. Hence it is not surprising that in recent years the media receives an increasing amount of information about the notable growth in number of trafficked victims from the western regions of Azerbaijan, which border Georgia (Alekperov).

Another transportation route for women from Azerbaijan goes through the south of the country into Iran and later into other countries in the Muslim East. Here the conclusion of real or sham marriages with Muslim men is widespread. This is due to the fact that the Azeri residents of border territories with Iran are both very pious and very poor. The Azeri media publishes a substantial number of articles about how Iranian traffickers come to these regions and take advantage of the poverty of the population, get married, or, actually, buy so-called "wives" who are often minors. The fate of these "wives" is unknown, but it is not difficult to guess that in most cases, they are sold on to brothels in Iran and other Muslim countries, or that they are used as slaves or servants. It is difficult to say how many such Azeri "wives" now live in Iran, Afghanistan or other Muslim countries. According to some reports, in 1998, approximately 2,000 Azeri girls and women married foreigners, mostly Muslims, and left the country (Alekperov). But whether or not they actually got married, their fate, is unknown: this kind of statistical data is missing, and it is difficult to draw conclusions.

In Turkey, most Azeri women are concentrated in Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Antalya, Trabzon, and Samsun. In the United Arab Emirates, most are to be found in the cities of Dubai and Sharjah.

Additionally, in Turkey, Azeri women prefer to engage in prostitution in certain neighbourhoods. For instance, in Istanbul, the European part of the city is considered a fairly lucrative area: the Laleli, Bayazit and Aksaray districts in the old part of the city, and the Taksim and Beyoglu districts in the new part.

Information about Azeri prostitutes in other eastern countries is less complete. However, it is known that in Iran, the majority is concentrated in the city of Tabriz and in the capital (Tehran); in Syria, the majority is concentrated in the capital (Damascus) and in Aleppo; in India in the capital (Delhi) and Mumbai (Bombay); and in Indonesia in the capital (Jakarta). Average earnings of Azeri prostitutes range from \$100 to \$200 *per* day, although sometimes higher “wages” are earned (Yunusov, 201-202).

The problem of human trafficking became so massive in character that the authorities of the Republic were forced to take it more seriously. In 2004, President Ilham Aliyev signed the long-awaited National Action Plan to Combat Trafficking in Persons. On the instructions of the Plan, a special Office for combatting Trafficking in Persons was created within the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Azerbaijan; a national coordinator for the fight against trafficking was appointed; and a rehabilitation centre for victims of trafficking was commissioned. Moreover, in 2005, Parliament adopted the Law “On Combating Trafficking in Human Beings.”

Following these measures, Azeri law enforcement bodies started to seriously deal with the problem of trafficking. The results were quick and striking. According to the official reports of the Deputy Ministry of Internal Affairs and the National Coordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings Vilayat Eivazov, in the period from 2004 till 2006, 689 facts of human trafficking were registered in Azerbaijan. Criminal charges were brought against 695 people; 83 criminal groups were neutralized, and 273 victims of human trafficking were identified. It was also noted that the highest number of trafficking victims in the country were recorded in the cities of Sumgait, Gazakh and Ganja. During the same period, law enforcement agencies identified and returned to Azerbaijan 900 victims of trafficking. The republic has 54 rehabilitation centres for trafficking victims (Yunusov, 206).

Notwithstanding these facts, human trafficking continued to grow massively. In addition, new trends appeared: Azerbaijan became part of an international network of trafficking. The annual U.S. Department of State report on human trafficking in the world for 2007 acknowledged that the republic’s authorities are making efforts to address the problem. However, these efforts are insufficient. Moreover, it was clearly stated that Azerbaijan was a transit country for the trafficking of women, men and children for sexual and labour exploitation (Trafficking, 2007).

In the following years, the annual U.S. Department of State report on international human trafficking provided more negative information about the trafficking situation in Azerbaijan. In the most recent report for 2012, it was again noted that Azerbaijan is a source, transit and destination country for men, women, and children who are subject to forced labour, as well as for women and children who are victims of sexual exploitation.

Women and children from Azerbaijan are subjected to sexual exploitation in the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Russia and Iran. Moreover, in 2011, Azeri victims were discovered in Afghanistan. It was further pointed out in the report that although the Azeri authorities make efforts to combat trafficking in human beings, so far these efforts have not brought tangible results. Certainly, Azerbaijan has not yet met the requirements of the Act on Trafficking Victims Protection. In the end, the Azeri authorities were encouraged to intensify their efforts to identify victims of forced labour. This should be done through the implementation of national mechanisms in the field as well as by means of training labour inspectors in active methods of identifying human trafficking victims (Trafficking 2012).

All of the above shows that today human trafficking in Azerbaijan is widespread, and that the problem is amongst the most urgent and pressing social and economic problems in the country.

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