

Supply and demand: Karachi's 'call girls'

Written by Massoud Ansari
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Britain's colonial legacy in Pakistan left a thriving but dark commercial sector in the country's capital, Karachi. Massoud Ansari investigates the city's desperate marketplace that trades in young women…

“Could you deflower a girl?" Madam Rabia asks one of her regular clients. "She has been rotting at my place for the last couple of weeks, with no potential customers…”

She wants to put the 14-year-old girl to work in Karachi's commercial sex market as soon as possible.

Rabia, popularly known as "Bhabi" in the Karachi circuit, demands 20,000 rupees for a night with her new recruit and guarantees the girl’s virginity personally.

“The market is down these days, otherwise she is worth at least 50,000 rupees,” she laments.

Rabai describes the girl as a “tithli" (fairy) and gives details of her age, figure, features and complexion. After some haggling, a deal is struck at 15,000 rupees, with an additional two thousand rupees thrown in as a “mithai for nath utrai” (tip for deflowering). The next day, the girl is delivered.

Far from being an exception, this is the typical manner in which hundreds of young girls enter the profession of commercial sex in the city to become "call girls."

Over the years, Karachi, the economic jugular of the country, has become one of the major "mandis" (markets) for commercial sex in Pakistan, where girls as young as 14 can be purchased from 300 rupees upwards, depending upon the client, the service demanded, the location, and the girl’s physical attributes.

As economic recession in the country deepens, many girls from different parts of Pakistan are thronging to Karachi where the market is comparatively better than in other nearby regions.

Salma, an 18-year old call girl, says: “In Lahore we can scarcely find enough business, but if we work only four weekends a month in Karachi, it fetches us twice the amount we would normally earn, despite working day and night…”

A wide variety of girls can be found in Karachi’s commercial sex market. They belong not only to local communities originating from different parts of the country, but also comprise women of foreign nationalities. According to the Society for Protection of the Rights of the Child (SPARC), some 200,000 Bangladeshi women have been trafficked into Pakistan in the last 10 years alone.

“Many of these girls are minors who are forced into the sex trade from surrounding countries; the majority of them end up in Karachi,” says the report.

Besides Bengali girls, women from the Central Asian States, Bosnia, Afghanistan and Burma can also be found marketing themselves in the capital.

Prostitution was formalised for the first time in the Indian subcontinent by the British government in the mid-18th century. The British colonialists enacted special laws, created "red light" areas and assigned the task of protecting women sex workers to law-enforcing agencies. Municipalities overlooking the sex districts were given the responsibility of collecting taxes and providing health and sanitation services to the brothels.

As an independent Muslim state, Pakistan does not officially allow prostitution. Unofficially, however, the practice is prevalent all over the country, with the majority of the clientele ironically comprised of politicians, bureaucrats, police officials and army personnel; in short, the very people who are supposed to legislate and implement laws against the sex trade.

Until the late 1970s - when General Zia-ul-Haq embarked upon a drive to "Islamise" Pakistani society, closing down brothels to the public, red light areas - as a legacy of British rule - continued to be institutionalised.

A local sociologist explains: “With the closure of brothels to the public, the prostitutes - whose profession is often passed from generation to generation - dispersed to the cities’ residential areas to earn their livelihoods. With the passage of time, girls from impoverished families also came to join them.”

The motivating factor for most call girls in Karachi today is the considerable amount of money they can earn in the profession. Some maintain they were compelled to enter prostitution because their families had no breadwinner left after

the death or remarriage of the household father, while others cite poverty resulting from divorce.

One call girl in Karachi claims: "My entire family depends on my income. My father died and I have to give at least 10,000 rupees every month to support my mother and the rest of my family. I'm divorced and have only a high school education. One of my friends told me about the money I could earn from prostitution and introduced me to "Auntie Shamim". The girl shares 40 per cent of her income with her "business auntie" in return for her contacts, shelter and protection.

While some of the girls start out on their own, the majority of them enter after coming into contact with a pimp. When a new girl enters any den, the incumbent workers show her the ropes and how to behave with the house clients.

Each girl, however, is responsible for striking their own deal with the pimps. While some share 40 to 50 per cent of their income with these touts, others prefer to work under a fixed monthly amount.

In return, pimps provide police protection, shelter, and bear their day-to-day expenses, including food and cigarettes.

A young call girl from Sahiwal, said: "My parents have "rented" me out for three months to Goga Bhai (a high-profile pimp in Karachi) for one lakh rupees (100,000)."

However, she says has no complaints about living with the man because she is treated well. "I don't have to have sex with him, which is normal at other places. He treats me like a brother!"

Once a girl is employed, she cannot refuse to oblige her pimp who will sell her on to as many clients as he wants. Pimps more often than not retain all the money the girls earn in tips, which are particularly forthcoming during dance performances or "mujras."

The majority of call girls learn to dance because they can earn more money.

Annie Noureen, a sex worker in Karachi, says: "The ones who don't know dancing hardly get any tips, but if we do, our clients, when they get drunk, shower us with all the money they have in their wallets..."

The optimum period in a call girl's life is a short one, and usually only lasts until they have crossed their teens.

A pimp said: "When the girl is young, she is like a cheque that one can cash even on Sundays, but when she begins to age, she is akin to rotten fish. It becomes hard for her to meet even her monthly expenses. Those with dancing skills, however, have some bonus years in which to attract customers in this marketplace."

The most astute call girls in Karachi work in tandem with their pimps for between six to eight months, after which time they strike out on their own to become suppliers.

A case in point is "Auntie" Shamim. A one time call girl, she is today one of the best-known pimps in Karachi's higher social strata.

In the initial years, Shamim had to work very hard not only for herself but also in order to cultivate enough contacts to begin her own operations with at least five girls in her employ.

Soon after she entered the world of commercial sex, Shamim bought herself a mobile phone and circulated her number among her clients.

"It's all a game of contacts; the more connected you are, the better the business," Shamim says. "The day I realised I had enough contacts, I started my own business..."

Now, Shamim boasts of having a select clientele among Karachi's high and mighty. Her cell phone scarcely stops ringing in the evenings as she cruises the city's upmarket localities, dropping girls at various given addresses.

The explosion in cell phones across the country have solved manifold problems for pimps and prostitutes.

Shahid, a local pimp, explained how mobile phones are essential for those in the business, chiefly because they ensure anonymity. "The police lost 80 per cent of the amount they used to extract from us through blackmail and extortion," he says.

"Once our whereabouts are known, we can easily be trapped by the police and they create lot of problems for us, including demanding free services from these girls as well as regular "bhatta" (extortion)."

Incidentally, many of the pimps switched to pagers during the suspension of mobile phone operations in Karachi by

Benazir Bhutto's government, which was directed at disrupting the communication network of terrorists and anti-state elements.

In order to avoid detection by law-enforcing agencies, call girls frequently shift apartments. A Karachi police official, says: "It's very difficult to track them down because they live for barely six months at any one place before shifting on to another."

Moreover, sex workers prefer to live in commercial areas where they can blend into the crowd and escape detection.

In order to hire a call girl in Karachi one has to be personally known to her or her tout. If this is not so, then acquaintance with someone who has connections with a supplier is essential. When contact has finally been made, rates are conveyed and the girl is supplied. Once the pimp is familiar with the new contact however, acquiring services becomes far less convoluted in future.

"Pimps have no problem dropping girls off at your place, but they avoid obliging people without references for fear that they may be walking into a police trap" says a regular client.

The modus operandi states a pimp will arrive at a client's door after the initial contact has been made, accompanied by a few well-groomed young women. The client offers them tea or cold drinks in order to take his time and choose the one he wants for the night. Questions are asked of them, and at times they are even physically harassed during the course of selection. However, because it is their bread and butter, the women usually make no protest. After the choice has finally been made, the client pays the pimp in advance. The pimp then leaves the house with the rest of the women and returns in the morning to collect the remaining girl.

A call girls' clientele is varied and includes both young and old men, serving and retired bureaucrats, politicians, feudals and businessmen. Most of the women consider an invitation by Sindhi feudals the most lucrative assignment as they are said to be the most generous paymasters of all. A source discloses: "Sometimes feudals even call these girls on "udhar" (deferred payment) and pay them later when their crop is sold."

Entertaining young men meanwhile, is usually deemed the least desirable job. Samia, a young girl in her teens recalls a particularly harrowing encounter: "Once when I went on call, there were six young men drinking alcohol in the drawing room. When they became drunk, one of them took me inside the room. After he was finished, the next wanted to sleep with me. I co-operated. To my utter dismay, the third demanded his turn. When I refused, they abused me verbally and pushed me around. I was weeping and begging them to stop but they showed me no mercy and came at me like animals. They said that as they had purchased my body for the night they could do with me whatever they wanted. By the time I returned home in the morning, I was such a wreck that I was unable to work for at least a week";

The sociologist implores the feelings of the girls to be considered and "how they sleep with people of different age groups, all with different temperaments, the fat and the slim; the educated and the uneducated; some of them violent, others nice; the black, wheatish and the whitish; the experienced and the inexperienced.

"It's like a mercenary killer or a thief who finds it difficult to commit the crime in the beginning, but becomes hardened after the second and third times," argues Manzoor Kohiyar, a Sindhi short story writer.

Most call girls, however, drink alcohol or smoke hashish on the job and say that when they finally sleep with their clients, they are devoid of feeling and offer only their bodies to them.

Suraya Parveen, who is known as "Gurya," speaks from seven-years experience as a call girl. She says: "Initially, the work used to really upset me but when I accepted the bitter reality that I had to do this, I just tuned my mind accordingly. Now there is no question of being happy or sad because normally I don't think about what they do with me";

However, one regular customer maintains: "I normally pay these girls extra money and request them to pretend as though they have an emotional connection with me. I cannot enjoy sex until then."

Some men bluntly claim they prefer call girls to girlfriends. A senior bureaucrat known as "Rangeela Badshah" in his circle says: "If you have a girlfriend, you spend a lot of money taking her out for meals or for shopping. She will start demanding that you marry her and if you refuse, she is quite liable to blackmail you, claiming pregnancy or other such shenanigans."

According to sources however, many businessmen and even some bureaucrats have a somewhat different modus operandi for buying sex. They purchase or rent "offices" and place advertisements in newspapers along the lines of "lady secretary needed" and attract many girls from impoverished families who, if willing, are hired solely for sexual services.

One businessman, who discreetly rented an office in Karachi's Saddar area for his trysts, said: "In sleeping with call girls, one runs the risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases, such as HIV, Hepatitis B and C among others. But when you're hiring a girl solely for yourself, there is less risk of getting infected." His "secretary" however, lasts only as long as his desire for her after which she is unceremoniously fired and an advertisement for a new one placed. "I have been doing this for over a decade and have so far had no difficulty in picking up women this way," he adds.

Other than the girls ferried around by pimps from place to place and those who pose as "secretaries," women offering sex for sale can also be found at certain boutiques and beauty parlours in the city. As in the case of regular call girls, potential customers initially need a reference to avail their services. A visitor to one such beauty parlour on Tariq Road discloses: "I went there for the first time with a friend of mine who was a frequent client and as I'm known to them now, I have no problem going there any time."

Sources reveal that the owner of the beauty parlour usually charges 1,000 rupees for a complete body massage lasting up to thirty or forty minutes. Clients can select their masseur from six to eight young women in their 20s. Co-operative ones give their customers more than a massage. "Most of them let you fondle their bodies in order to make tips at the end of the job," says another visitor to beauty parlours. However, if the customer also wants sex, the price tag can be somewhere between two to three thousand rupees.

In an increasingly materialistic society, values have become skewed, and practices once considered taboo avoid the censure that was once their due. In many cases, politicians act as procurers in return for political favours such as lucrative ministries while businessmen resort to the practice to clinch business deals. A group of policemen and bureaucrats in Sindh justify their habit of procuring call girls in return for favours from important government officials as being in sync with the "new world order." According to a source, the logic behind this is simple: "Market say lee, aur market main day dee" (Pick it up from the market and hand it over in the market). Karachi's higher echelon localities are dotted with lavishly decorated houses and apartments where these VIPs are entertained. The bedrooms in these houses feature not only comfortable beds, sometimes waterbeds, but often boast full-length mirrors along the walls as well as on the ceiling.

According to sources, when a no-confidence move was launched against Benazir Bhutto in 1989 during her first tenure, many PPP-backed MNAs from Punjab and NWFP were shifted to Karachi. Playing host to them was another MNA from Sindh, who was instructed to ensure that their stay in the city was as comfortable as possible. One source said: "During their sojourn, which lasted over two weeks, most of them were supplied with a new girl and a bottle of scotch every day."

At times, however, riotous parties replete with alcohol and call girls have resulted in mayhem. Two years ago, in the famous "Babli case," the deputy commissioner of Mirpur Khas district threw a "mujra" to which he invited a number of senior and junior bureaucrats. A scuffle broke out when two senior bureaucrats wanted to sleep with the same girl. When she escaped from their clutches and fled, one of them asked the police to pursue her vehicle. In the course of their pursuit, the police fired at the vehicle and the girl, Babli, a well-known dancer from Hyderabad sustained serious bullet injuries. Subsequently, when the incident was reported in the press, the DC, SDM and other officials involved were suspended and an official inquiry was ordered by the provincial government.

A considerable number of bureaucrats, politicians and others with power and pelf have their "keeps" as well. A source says: "In return for fixed monthly expenses, the 'keep' is available on call to the man in question." There have been instances when clients have become serious in their affections and married their regular call girls. However, according to Sheereen, a local call girl: "Usually, the men are dissuaded by pressure from family and friends who advise them against it on the grounds that marrying such a girl would be a stain on their family honour." Sheereen herself has had two serious liaisons, both of which came to naught.

Commercial sex was at its height until the late '90s, but the severe economic downturn in the country over the last few years has had a negative impact on this business as well. Says a young sex worker named Shazia: "In the good days, we were so busy we barely had time to return or at times even answer our clients' calls, but now we often make calls to them ourselves to offer our services. It's a hardly a break even situation these days."

Many pimps, meanwhile, have turned to peddling young girls to attract otherwise reluctant customers. According to reports, 20 per cent of the prostitutes in Pakistan are children under the age of 16. It is estimated that in Asia, over one million children are involved in the sex trade often under conditions no better than slavery.

Ms. Tahira, a "madam" who has been operating in Karachi for the last decade, said: "Every man who comes asks for younger and younger girls. The demand for them means that the young ones fetch more money and get more clients per day."

Most analysts recognise poverty as a crucial factor in driving women towards an occupation such as prostitution. This factor, compounded by their low status in this society, results in a lethal combination that marginalises women and

ensures their continuous flow into this profession. Caught in a vicious cycle from which few escape, it renders them even more vulnerable to exploitation and victimisation.

One analyst commented: "In this institution, the body is that of the women and the pleasure derived from it is totally that of men."

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