

## Prostitution, human trafficking main Mindanao problems

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by Al Jacinto  
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Zamboanga City: Prostitution and human trafficking are increasing in many areas in the southern Philippines, but local officials appear helpless to stop the activities.

In Cotabato City, Maguindanao, young women are said to be selling their bodies for as low as P500. Many openly advertise their trade in bars and in public squares frequented by travelers and soldiers.

A group of about 40 sex workers had put up an association in Cotabato to promote their trade.

Davao, Cagayan de Oro, General Santos and Pagadian face similar problems, but lack of money hampers the government's campaign to eradicate them.

"This is our dilemma. Many men and soldiers continue to patronize sex workers in karaoke bars that have mushroomed near the military camps in Maguindanao," said Abdullah Cusain, spokesman for Mayor Muslimen Sema of Cotabato City.

He said poverty is driving some women to prostitution. He was, however, quick to say that most of the sex workers in Cotabato come from as far as Agusan and Zamboanga and have been lured by the presence of soldiers.

"Poverty drove many women into prostitution and we are doing our part to put a stop, if not control, the increasing and alarming problems of prostitution," Cusain said. "The task is difficult, because men usually engage the services of sex workers. The spread of sex diseases is our main concern."

Health workers regularly conduct education campaigns in Cotabato. They warn of the danger posed by unsafe sex, Cusain said. "We need more funds to help us sustain our campaign. We need to save the women from this menace and provide them alternative livelihood."

In the early 1990s, many prostitutes turned up dead after Muslim rebels executed them. Prostitution is prohibited by Islam, he said.

One sex worker, Angel Gaga, a 16-year-old high-school dropout from Pagadian City, Zamboanga del Sur, said she was forced into prostitution after she was raped by her stepfather.

Gaga said she escaped from home after months of sexual assaults that happened every time her mother, a laundrywoman, went to work.

"I landed in Cotabato and found some friends, who turned out to be prostitutes, and I later became one. I don't like this job, but there is no more I can do, and there is nothing for me out there," she said.

She usually went out with travelers, and in the past, had sex several times with foreigners. "I usually go out with men, maybe up to three a night. Pay is sometimes good, but not all the time. They pay me P500 for three hours, and I get tips also. Pimps get P100 or P200 from the customers," she said.

Gaga said she and about two dozen other young women from other provinces stay together in one house, where pimps can contact them.

“It is a hard life, and I am stuck in it. Who knows someday, I will have a family of my own,” she said.

Nongovernment organizations and the Department of Social Welfare and Development estimate there are around 600,000 victims of prostitution. As many as 75,000 are children.

The Philippines ranks fourth among countries with the most number of prostituted children, according to a study by the psychological trauma program of the University of the Philippines.

The study said that prostitution may become the country’s “fourth-largest gross national product.”

Government policies favor the export of entertainers and domestic helpers and unwittingly put women at risk of sexual exploitation.

Human trafficking is a major problem in the Philippines. A report by the US State Department has warned Manila for not complying with international standards to eliminate human trafficking.

The President’s spokesman, Ignacio Bunye, insisted the government’s campaign against human trafficking is relentless.

“However, we take note of our current standing in this global drive and we are determined to improve our ranking,” Bunye said

Ref.: [http://trafficking.org.ph/v5/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=1009&Itemid=56](http://trafficking.org.ph/v5/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1009&Itemid=56)