

'It is my only hope': Women forced to sell sex to survive as Sri Lanka's turmoil escalates

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Former garment makers in Sri Lanka are having to take desperate measures to get through the economic crisis

A diminutive female figure enters the brightly lit courtyard, tugging a blue Disney-themed dress below her knees and swatting away the mosquitoes.

With a sigh, she expresses her disappointment that it is a journalist who has entered the makeshift brothel and not a client.

The brothel is housed in a gloomy roadside building in Katunayake, a nondescript industrial zone close to Colombo's Bandaranaike International Airport. A former soldier stands guard at the entranceway where a sign advertises the facility as an ayurvedic spa.

Every day, Kalyani Wickremanayake*, 33, takes several clients behind a green curtain onto a makeshift bed. After her initial bravado subsides, she nervously shares her plight: "Poor politics has shattered my life and this is my only hope to put food on the table for my children."

For the past two weeks, she has been selling sex to survive, as Sri Lanka endures one of the [world's worst economic crises](#).

And, she is far from alone. There has been a 30 per cent increase in women joining the sex industry in Colombo since January, according to the Stand Up Movement Lanka (SUML), the country's leading advocacy group for sex workers.

Ashila Dandeniya, the SUML's executive director, said: "They are desperate to support their children, parents or even their siblings. It is one of the very few remaining professions in Sri Lanka that offers a lot of quick money. But few know what they are getting into."

Sri Lanka is teetering dangerously [on the verge of total collapse](#). There are chronic nationwide shortages of food, life-saving medicines and fuel. Deadly violence threatens to break out again at any moment.

It hasn't always been this way. As recently as 2019, Sri Lanka was heralded by the World Bank as a lower middle-income country; a developing economic success story.

A large part of this derived from a booming apparel and textile industry that, in 2019, exported £4.4 billion of goods.

Factories primarily staffed by women would churn out produce for major multinationals, including Nike, Marks & Spencer and Gap.

But women working in the garment sector have now seen their daily wages, about 1,000 Sri Lankan rupees (£2.20), [become worthless](#) because of out-of-control inflation which is expected to reach 40 per cent.

Padmini Weerasuriya, the director of the Women's Centre, a Sri Lankan NGO supporting garment workers, explained: "The whole garment industry is at risk. The cost of production has also gone up and factories have begun trimming down their personnel.

"We could see up to one million people, mainly women, facing unemployment over the next six months if the economic crisis worsens as expected."

Ms Dandeniya described a "huge movement" of women into Colombo since January, many arriving from Sri Lanka's remote villages. The majority of the women previously worked in garment factories.

"These women have only worked in the garment industry for their entire lives. They have no professional training to find other, skilled work," she added.

Opportunities in agriculture are currently unavailable to women as yields dropped by up to 50 per cent last year and a high proportion of the country's farmland remains idle after the country's ruling Rajapaksa family suddenly banned chemical fertilisers in May 2021.

Every day, scores of young women now arrive in Colombo seeking employment. About 1,000 women gather at a tall silver gate in Katunayake, a known site for recruiters.

The lucky ones will find work in a factory or on a construction site. The remainder are targeted by pimps and madams, who can easily exploit their desperation, explained Ms Dandeniya.

Often, the women are told they will be giving non-sexual massages, but on arrival at the brothel are threatened and cajoled into sex work.

Pimps are also known to visit women-only boarding houses on Colombo's outskirts and target women recently pushed into poverty.

Prostitution remains illegal in Sri Lanka so Ms Wickremanayake's* brothel markets itself as an ayurvedic spa: a retreat offering holistic, traditional treatments.

Police know about the operation. But Nayandini Silva*, the brothel's madame, regularly gives the local station large sums of rupees to pay their monthly expenses, everything from electricity to restaurant bills. Sometimes, staff are forced to have sex with policemen.

According to Ms Silva*, the number of clients has dropped, despite the surge in women working in the industry, due to the economic crisis. However, the facility still attracts around 10 customers daily, usually men from the country's upper class.

Pushpakumari Jayakody* is the most talkative of the women working at the brothel and readily reels off a list of her customers.

"Recently we had a famous member of the mafia in Colombo and I could see all his bullet wounds. I've had doctors, lawyers and even reverends," the 21-year-old said.

"There is this one, old professor and he can barely walk, but every time he comes he pays to spend time with all the girls at once."

The dangers are evident, though. Another of her colleagues says many of the women have been assaulted or robbed by their clients. A gaping, round hole in the front door of the brothel is blamed on an attack by the owner of a rival brothel.

The women's deteriorating economic situation also encourages them to engage in non-protective sex at the request of their clients, while some say they exchange sex for food with local shopkeepers when the brothel is quiet.

Despite such desperation, Sri Lanka has not yet hit rock bottom. Ranil Wickremesinghe, the country's new prime minister, warned citizens to prepare for the most "difficult months of their lives" - food, fuel and medicines prices are expected to surge further.

Gross economic mismanagement by the Rajapaksas has resulted in Colombo owing more than £27 billion to debtors and having less than £1 million in the bank. It simply cannot afford to import a wide range of essentials.

[At least 14 life-saving drugs](#) are unavailable, including anti-rabies vaccines. This week, a father-of-two died near Colombo as hospitals had run out of a previously common heart attack drug.

Pensioners who witnessed Sri Lanka's independence from the UK in 1948 are surviving on one handful of rice a day and say they are [slowly starving to death](#). The price of basic foodstuffs, such as tomatoes and onions, has soared six-fold since January.

[Fuel shortages are so severe](#) that schools were shut nationwide on Friday to preserve remaining supplies. Motorists must queue outside petrol stations for up to 24 hours, sleeping overnight in their vehicles, to fill up their tanks.

On Tuesday, as I stood outside a filling station in Katunayake, one visibly emotional Sri Lankan soldier, currently deployed to keep the peace, entreated: "What will become of us and our country?"

Colombo has approached the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a bailout; it officially defaulted on its debt repayments a week ago. While the IMF could bring long-term relief, there is little domestic appetite for short-term cost-cutting.

Meanwhile, anti-government protests continue to rage around the country and patience is thin. Demonstrators have already succeeded in pressuring Sri Lanka's cabinet to resign, [including Mahinda Rajapaksa](#), the former prime minister.

However, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, his brother, remains in power as president [and is refusing to budge](#) despite nationwide calls for him to resign.

Mr Wickremesinghe, his replacement, was formerly prime minister five times and many anti-government protesters see him as a historic Rajapaksa ally.

Sri Lanka's military has been deployed onto the streets. Heavily armed, and with a "shoot on sight" mandate after [anti-government protesters torched the homes](#) and businesses of the Rajapaksas and their allies on May 9 in retribution for a pro-government attack on peaceful demonstrators, violence threatens to break out at any moment.

Back in Katunayake, Ms Silva's* phone never stops ringing. With a wry smile, she says she has never received so many calls from women seeking to work in the sex industry.

She said: "I've just had two girls call me from all the way in north-western Sri Lanka, asking to work

here. They just don't have any opportunities because of the crisis.

"The girls getting into this industry are helpless people, I am keeping them off the streets."

** The names of some interviewees have been changed to protect their identities*

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