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AFRICA/MADAGASCAR - One out of 7 women is sexually exploited: poverty allows prostitution to spread

Antananarivo (Agenzia Fides) - In less than 20 years, the number of registered prostitutes in the main port city of Madagascar, Toamasina, where about 200 000 people, has risen from 17,000 in 1993 to 29,000 in 2012. It is estimated that one woman out of seven is sexually exploited. The state of poverty is increasingly spreading and the city's proximity to Ambatovy, one of the largest nickel and cobalt mines in the world, contribute to the worsening of the problem. According to government estimates, more than three quarters of the Malagasy population now lives on less than $ 1 per day. The construction of the mine and the recent improvements of the harbor have led to the influx of thousands of foreign workers. The cost of living has increased and traditional businesses have collapsed, pushing more women into the sex industry. Prostitution, in fact, is normal and legal in Madagascar, a means to survive. The girls come from the countryside to work in the city as waitresses. Then, when they have a problem with their employer, other girls of their own region, introduce them to prostitution. Despite the prevalence of HIV/AIDS is lower compared to other countries in Africa, with about 0.2% of people between 15 and 49 years of age infected with the virus, the incidence of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) such as syphilis, is well above the regional average. According to statistics 4% of pregnant women is affected, as well as 12% of women prostitutes. Until six years ago, Antsohihy, the capital of the northern region of Sofia, was cut off from the rest of the country, but in 2006 the rebuilding of a road to the capital, Antananarivo, has reopened the area to trade, including that of sex. There is no reliable data on this city and, in recent years, municipal governments have established a system of identification for prostitutes that legally protects and provides them with health care. This same system did not work in Toamasina, where identity cards have been replaced by unofficial red books giving access to prostitutes to legal clinics in the nearby tourist destination Mahambo. (AP) (Agenzia Fides 06/11/2012)

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