

# INTERVIEW/ Yumeno Nito: Havens needed for schoolgirls in sleazy 'JK' business

December 22, 2014

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By MAKI OKUBO/ Senior Staff Writer

Adults need to get more involved to prevent vulnerable teenage girls from falling prey to the evils of the thriving "JK" industry, said a social activist with a troubled past.

Businesses dealing in "JK," or "joshi kosei" (high school girls), are expanding and increasingly targeting "ordinary girls" for employment, Yumeno Nito said in a recent interview with The Asahi Shimbun.

One business model called "JK osanpo" (strolls with high school girls) was denounced as a form of sex trafficking in the 2014 Trafficking in Persons Report of the U.S. State Department.

To deal with this problem, Nito said adults must show the teenagers that assistance and understanding are available.

Excerpts from the interview follow:

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**Question:** What were you like when you were in senior high school?

**Nito:** I was in Tokyo's Shibuya district (a major youth hangout) 25 days a month. I didn't like being at home, where my parents were always fighting. I drank and I smoked. At times, I took the first train of the morning to go home, and at other times, I slept on cardboard on a building rooftop.

I was in total despair. I had no dreams or aspirations, and I thought nobody could understand me. I thought I belonged nowhere, just like the high school girls I am now assisting. I always wished I would die.

The only adults who spoke to me on the street were men who were after sex and recruiters who asked if I wanted to work for their outlets. I thought the world only consisted of teachers and parents who were eager to push their values and men who wanted to capitalize on the youth and flesh of us high school girls.



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Yumeno Nito (Photo by Hiroki Nishida)

**Q:** What helped you out of that life?

**A:** My parents got divorced, and I dropped out of senior high school within two years. A while later, I was invited to join a “farm seminar,” which involved working on a farm every Saturday. I wasn’t interested in working on a farm, but I was told the program came with meals, so I went there in a miniskirt and high heels. There, I met Toshifumi Aso, an instructor.

Aso, a pastor, died four years ago at age 69. He was involved in helping Japanese-Filipino children abandoned by their Japanese fathers.

“Welcome,” he said upon seeing me. “But don’t you feel cold in that skirt? Your panties are almost showing.”

Some people on the farm were assisting refugees or were involved in evening classes at junior high schools. Their casual conversations gradually opened my eyes to the presence of adults I had never known about before—adults who were not after my flesh and who were not interested in capitalizing on me.

Aso was the first adult who accepted me just as I was.

He took me to the Philippines, where we visited shantytowns and other places. Everything I saw there was enough to shock me.

Teenage girls in a red-light district were eagerly learning Japanese and accompanying Japanese men to hotels for a few thousand yen (tens of dollars). “It’s the same as in Shibuya,” I told myself.

To see if there was no other choice for hard-up girls, I developed a desire to study, so I entered university. I would have been selling sex if I had not met Aso.

**Q:** How are you helping high school girls?

**A:** I noticed the spread of JK industries a couple of years ago.

I once worked part time in a “maid cafe,” and all the girls working there at the time had some sort of background circumstances. However, an increasing number of “ordinary” girls with no financial problems or relationship problems with their families and schools started working in the industry.



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That is because maid cafes, which previously were seen as shady establishments with links to the underworld, won recognition in mainstream society. “JK rifure” (massaging by high school girls in private rooms) and “JK osanpo” services used to be provided secretly in the shadows, but they are now being provided openly and in broad daylight.

I was alarmed by the large number of ordinary girls in JK businesses, so I took to the streets and began listening to the girls. I am currently a confidante with some 50 of them.

I listen to them, I share meals with them from time to time, and I tell them to get in touch with me if anything happens. Depending on what they have to tell me, I sometimes tell them that they are dangerously engaged in prostitution. The girls are so defenseless. Underworld people are quick to capitalize on that.

**Q:** How specifically do they do so?

**A:** Recruiters gently talk to them into joining. Shop managers make sure they feel comfortable there, such as by listening to their problems and offering words of encouragement. Some outlets even help girls with their schoolwork while they are on standby. They do so simply because the high school girls are their merchandise, but the girls end up confiding in the shop managers.

Shop owners sometimes show up and tell them, "Hey, you are doing great." There are even guesthouses that accommodate girls who have nowhere to stay at night.

Schools and administrative bodies are being outfoxed by the triangle of recruiters, shop managers and shop owners who can deftly deal with different types of girls. While providing the girls with both basic material needs and relationships, they coax them into working in the JK, entertainment and sex industries.

**Q:** You are organizing nocturnal tours to Tokyo's Shibuya and Shinjuku entertainment districts. What is your goal?

**A:** I am doing so because I want more people to understand the girls and deal with their problems. The schoolgirls believe, just as I did before, that no adults will understand them. They have nobody to turn to when they are in need.

While I keep telling them, "Don't forget to contact me if anything happens," I want all adults to say the same thing to the girls.

**Q:** There are so many things that adults don't know about, aren't there?

**A:** Yes. Girls can go to dating cafes and bars free of charge. So they go there to eat. Men go there to see the girls. You can imagine what follows.

There are also video phone apps that allow you to connect with strangers for free. They often show a man with his groin exposed.

When the man on the other side happens to look good-natured and asks to exchange Line (free call and messaging app) IDs, the girls do comply with the request.

With smartphones as widespread as they are, children do not think it is anything special to go and meet strangers through friend-matching apps or other means. We have to face that reality in teaching them at schools, especially in compulsory education courses, about the dangers.

The hurdles toward such dangers are getting ever lower, but adults are not catching up to the trend.

**Q:** What do you think adults can do for the girls?

**A:** We should create havens where the girls can feel at home. What I have in mind is an organization to counsel girls with a napping area that provides care and a meal.

An 18-year-old girl from Kyushu contacted me recently and said: "I always wanted to die. But I learned you are trying to create a haven for us. I also want to create something similar in the area where I live." Many girls feel the same way.

I will no longer be a young woman five years from now. I want to get more young colleagues involved in continuing to assist girls.

Men who are after "enjo kosai" (paid dating) never stop approaching girls just because the girls call them "annoying," "creepy" and "sweaty." We adults have to be just as tenacious in approaching the girls if we want to help them.

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Born in 1989, Nito is the founder of Colabo, a support center for senior high school girls, which she set up as a student at Meiji Gakuin University.

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