

## Notorious 'JK' business exploits troubled high school girls for sex

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Seventeen-year-old Momo shrugs and says she was aware of the dangers when she decided to join other girls in Tokyo's Akihabara district handing out racy fliers to male passers-by and flashing them coquettish smiles.

The schoolgirl knew men would occasionally try to talk her into sexual activities. She even knew that she might be assaulted.

Nonetheless, she willingly put herself in harm's way. With a wry smile, Momo said if a rapist had attacked her, she wouldn't have minded.

"I was so depressed at the time that I didn't mind (being raped) if that's what a guy needed me for," said Momo, who asked to be identified by a pseudonym rather than her real name.

"I was desperate. And if sex was all it took to make me stop feeling so worthless, I thought I was game for anything."

Momo is among the schoolgirls whom experts warn are prone to gravitate toward the notorious "JK" business — JK being short for "joshi kosei" (high school girls) — rampant in Akihabara and other parts of central Tokyo.

Even though police have cracked down in recent years, experts say the shady part-time job industry featuring high school girls remains a hotbed of teen exploitation and sex trafficking. And the traffickers, ever wary of law enforcement, appear to be changing their tactics to stay one step ahead of the police.

The JK business has variants, including JK "rifure" (reflexology), where the girls give massages and lie next to their clients, and JK "osanpo" (tour guide), where the girls stroll with customers as if on a date.

But be it massaging or sauntering, the men often exploit their privacy with the girls to pressure them for sex or outright assault them, experts say.

In an annual report on trafficking released in June, the U.S. State Department cited JK osanpo for the first time as it slammed Japan for child prostitution.

"Sophisticated and organized prostitution networks target vulnerable Japanese women and girls in public areas such as subways, popular youth hangouts, schools and online," the report says.

In January 2013, Tokyo police raided 17 JK rifure parlors in pursuit of alleged violations of the labor standards law.

In response to the heightened police surveillance, traffickers who hire the girls have changed tactics to make their business look more innocuous.

Instead of asking male passers-by if they want a massage or to take a stroll, many girls distributing fliers now say their job is simply to “chat” with the men, or, bizarre as it may sound, “tell their fortune” in a cafe-like setting.

But even those purportedly harmless pursuits lead to child prostitution, according to Yumeno Nito, a 24-year-old activist who runs Colabo, a support group that helps to rehabilitate exploited teenage girls.

“Granted, it’s not like there are actual sexual activities going on in those places,” she said, but men go there with the aim of meeting girls and exchanging contact information so they can later meet elsewhere and negotiate for sex directly.

“So in a way, tightened regulations made a (sexual) exchange between the girls and customers more private and therefore harder to detect,” Nito said.

In the latest development, two men were reportedly arrested in October for running what they touted as a JK “komyu” (communications) parlor in Tokyo’s Takadanobaba district. Despite its name, it invited customers to help the girls change into bathing suits and then sniff them.

Since founding Colabo in 2011 while still in college, Nito said she has encountered many girls in the industry who have been sexually victimized while working.

“Some men forcibly undress or kiss them, but that’s not the worst. Some girls are raped. One girl was even tied up sadomasochistic-style as photographs were taken,” she said.

“Unlike professional hostesses in the adult entertainment business, these girls are still naive in a way that they, for example, recoil in fear when guys try to touch them. The men apparently find this kind of naive reaction a turn-on.”

A former high school dropout herself, Nito said most girls who get into the JK business do it because they feel isolated and have few people they can trust. Others are drawn to it for money for college, or out of curiosity.

But the girls in the business by and large have poor human relationships and feel neglected both at home and at school, thus taking emotional refuge in the backstreet industry, Nito noted.

“These girls are in a way homeless. They have a physical house, yes, but they have no home where they can build actual human bonds,” she said.

Momo is a case in point. She lives with her mother, who suffers extreme mood swings, and Momo has been diagnosed with schizophrenia. She said she has few friends at school and once tried to kill herself with a drug overdose.

“It’s not like I joined the industry just out of curiosity. I wanted to know if there is really somebody out there who needs me, even if it’s just sexually,” she said.

One of Momo’s few friends, 15-year-old Kaori, has a similar story.

Kaori's parents divorced when she was a child. "I was in a dark place," she said, and has lived with her father since the split.

"My dad is rarely at home, always busy with his work. And he doesn't seem to notice me. So I thought, if I got into some trouble by engaging in this sort of shady business — like being taken into police custody or something — then he will finally begin to pay attention to me."

She said she feels her teachers at school are avoiding her, and with a resigned tone acknowledged she has no adults around her with whom she can have a heart-to-heart talk.

Both girls said they doubt they could work normal part-time jobs because of having to turn up at a set time. The thought of that, they said, makes them panic.

Many JK parlors allow girls to show up for work whenever they feel like it, or at least so they claim in online recruitment ads.

"I feel many girls in the industry are in one way or another mentally depressed," Nito said. "And just when they're so disappointed with their inability to engage in shift work, they realize the JK business offers a very flexible working style. That's how they're drawn to it."

Nito believes rampant child prostitution in the JK business will not die out unless both the facilitators and customers are punished.

"The traffickers run their businesses in a way that keeps them just within the law. So it's hard to bust them," said Kosei Uchida, the Tokyo police officer in charge of the section that addresses the well-being of adolescents, in a statement delivered by fax.

Likewise, lawyer Kozue Hattori said police usually do not move against male customers for alleged sex with minors unless there is a compelling case — such as when a girl reports being sexually assaulted, when parents file a report and when girls are found during a raid.

"It's true some (sexual offense) cases are not investigated and end up in a void," said Hattori, whose clients include men accused of sex with minors.

She said she believes the girls are not entirely blameless: When lawyers meet the girls to discuss an out-of-court settlement, the victims sometimes say they wish the man had never been arrested as it represents a loss of their "cash cow."

But Nito said adults must shoulder the blame.

"You might think the girls are to blame for selling their bodies," she said. "But the girls are teens who are still too immature to understand the gravity of what they're doing. The guys, on the other hand, are grown-ups. They should know what they're doing. There is a huge difference."

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