

Tokyo 'bus cafe,' a safe haven from sexual exploitation for troubled young girls

BY TOMOHIRO OSAKI
STAFF WRITER

Dec 30, 2018

Unmistakable for its exterior splashed with illustrations of colorful flowers, a bright pink bus glows at a Shibuya park one December evening, its dazzling design standing out as the darkness of the night sets in.

Set up nearby are three pink tents. Once inside, visitors are greeted with everything from hot meals to manga, as well as an array of daily necessities — clothes, toothbrushes, menstrual products and even condoms — which guests at this makeshift “bus cafe” are welcome to take home for free.

The visitors to Tsubomi Cafe are, for the most part, teenage girls who are often hesitant to return to homes where poverty or abusive situations are an issue. For them, wandering around the streets at night is often inevitable, even though that means they are at risk of attracting unwanted attention from men trying to sexually exploit them.

“In Japan, people who approach those girls on the street are men trying to recruit them for sex businesses or pay them for sex, or sometimes police officers who want to take them into custody based on the assumption they are some kind of delinquent,” said Yumeno Nito, 29, who heads Colabo, a Tokyo-based organization that runs the free cafe initiative.

“We wanted to offer them a new alternative by creating a place where they can connect with adults who genuinely want to support them, and feel safe,” Nito said.

Sexual exploitation of marginalized teens is deeply ingrained in Japan, home to the practice of the so-called JK business — services that provide men with dates with underage *joshi kosei* (high school girls.)

But there are signs of change. In July 2017, an ordinance took effect in Tokyo to ban girls aged under 18 from engaging in such services while also mandating operators of these underground businesses to register their employee rosters with the city’s public safety commission. In its 2018 Trafficking in Persons report, the U.S. State Department upgraded Japan into Tier 1 for the first time, citing, among other things, an improved effort to combat the JK business.

Still, traffickers and their underlings continue to skulk down the streets of Shibuya and Shinjuku in pursuit of girls they can coax and manipulate into working for them, Nito said. She also criticized the Tokyo legislation for focusing on exploited girls, instead of men who pay them for their sexual services.

Colabo was established in 2011, when Nito was still an undergraduate student. Since then, the organization has frequently reached out to teens roaming the streets at night, such as runaways. But its attempt to bond with them hasn’t always been successful, as some girls mistakenly believe they are being accosted by police officers and don’t easily trust Colabo staff.

At 6 p.m. every Wednesday, the bus arrives at a designated spot in Shibuya or Shinjuku wards, alternating between the two sites each week. The project, which was launched in October, is mostly financed by donations, but to a lesser extent subsidized by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, having been designated as one of its model initiatives seeking to support “victimized young women,” Nito said.

But Nito also said it is essential to make sure the project “doesn’t smack too much of a helping hand.”

“We don’t really want to advertise the cafe as some kind of shelter for runaways or kids in trouble, because the idea of accepting support or consulting someone could be a turn-off for them,” Nito said.

“So any teen girl is welcome, really. You don’t need to be a runaway to come to us. If you want to swing by just because you’re hungry or in need of a good resting place, that’s fine, too. We want to make this cafe as accessible as possible so that — hopefully — we can become one of those faces you would think of years later when you may be truly in need of someone to talk to.”

As such, the bus cafe project doesn’t place so much emphasis on solving problems that girls face at home as it does on initiating a relationship with them or simply offering them company.

Although Nito is always available for those willing to discuss their issues, girls who show up there typically idle away their hours eating, reading and watching YouTube videos on their smartphones, she said.

But not everyone visits Tsubomi Cafe just out of curiosity.

Some girls are in the throes of despair, winding up there after they tweeted their desperation with hashtags such as *shinitai* (I want to die) or *kamimachi* (waiting for god) — internet slang used to solicit “godlike” men who offer runaways places to stay, often in exchange for sex.

Among those who populated Tsubomi Cafe in Shibuya earlier this month was a 15-year-old girl from Tokyo who said she was routinely subject to physical abuse from her older brother, who would hit her and sometimes even threaten her with a knife.

“My parents do nothing at all to stop him so I don’t feel safe at home,” said the girl, who declined to be named, citing privacy.

To escape the violence, she would turn to her friends and bounce from place to place, feeling bad and ashamed — until she found out about Tsubomi Cafe through one of her friends.

“This is my home now. It’s something I really look forward to every week,” she said.

Although a life-saver for girls like her, Tsubomi Cafe has had its share of problems since it started operation in October.

One of them is its relationship with bureaucracy. Tokyo, Nito said, once asked her to put up a sign outside the bus clarifying this is part of the city’s designated projects to support “victimized young women” so residents nearby would better understand the initiative.

“But I was like ‘no way.’ What kind of girl would want to go to a place touted as offering help to victimized women? That would defeat our whole purpose of making this place accessible.”

The other issue is the scope of eligible guests.

front of the Shinjuku Ward office, which is located adjacent to the infamous red-light district of Kabukicho.

“In Japan, sexual exploitation is such a serious business that we couldn’t ignore the risk of those scouts sneaking in and spying on the girls. ... So to protect them, we had to declare the place off-limits to boys from then on,” Nito said. As a precaution, a team of male volunteers, including lawyers, now stand guard near the premises to stave off any unwanted intruders.

“But I could see these boys, too, have led lives similar to the girls! Their eyes sparkled when I gave them a free boxed meal and they gorged on it. But sadly, the fact they were here, acting under their bosses’ instructions, means they have become exploiters themselves.”

In a time of both misinformation and too much information,
quality journalism is more crucial than ever.
By subscribing, you can help us get the story right.

SUBSCRIBE (/subscribe/?
NOW utm_source=jto&utm_medium=general-
box&utm_campaign=sub)

(<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/01/09/national/media-national/covid-19-positives-social-media/>)

The search for positive takeaways from a year of COVID-19 on social media

(<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/01/09/national/media-national/covid-19-positives-social-media/>)

(<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/01/13/asia-pacific/science-health-asia-pacific/china-sinovac-vaccine-efficacy/>)

China’s COVID-19 shot has four wildly different efficacy rates

(<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/01/13/asia-pacific/science-health-asia-pacific/china-sinovac-vaccine-efficacy/>)

(<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/11/07/world/politics-diplomacy-world/ruPERT-murdoch-donald-trump/>)

Is Rupert Murdoch dumping Trump?

(<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/11/07/world/politics-diplomacy-world/ruPERT-murdoch-donald-trump/>)

(http://mimosami.com/kokutoujure-02a-t01?utm_source=taboola&utm_medium=referral&tblci=GiDzYHR49UmBSKqBbVgCHyMMEimmo4VYVcw24IK9jGMekiD87kwo48-x3LaJzPBx#tblciGiDzYHR49UmBSKqBbVgCHyMMEimmo4VYVcw24IK9jGMekiD87kwo48-x3LaJzPBx)

「ジム辞める人続出」製薬会社が開発した和菓子の減量法がスゴイ

(:SPONSORED BY ([HTTPS://POPUP.TABOOLA.COM/EN/?TEMPLATE=COLORBOX&UTM_SOURCE=JAPANTIMES&UTM_MEDIUM=REFERRAL&UTM_CONT](https://popup.taboola.com/en/?template=COLORBOX&utm_source=japantimes&utm_medium=referral&utm_cont)

(http://mimosami.com/kokutoujure-02a-t01?utm_source=taboola&utm_medium=referral&tblci=GiDzYHR49UmBSKqBbVgCHyMMEimmo4VYVcw24IK9jGMekiD87kwo48-x3LaJzPBx#tblciGiDzYHR49UmBSKqBbVgCHyMMEimmo4VYVcw24IK9jGMekiD87kwo48-x3LaJzPBx)

Get unlimited access. The first month is on us.

SUBSCRIBE NOW

NZHOaYaoS6Xh7GN5O4&maxdest=https%3A%2F%2Frealstate.yahoo.co.jp%2Frent%2Fdetail%2F00000132199142be683add7af787798053e5346a1954%2F%3Fult_out%3Ddm_PpO2nq8dE#tblciGiDzYHR49UmBSKqBbVgCHyMMEimmo4VYVcw24IK9jGMekiDwjE4o0s-PpO2nq8dE)

宝塚駅 歩25分 / 4LDK

(:SPONSORED BY (HTTPS://POPOP.TABOOLA.COM/EN/?TEMPLATE=COLORBOX&UTM_SOURCE=JAPANTIMES&UTM_MEDIUM=REFERRAL&UTM_CONT (https://cat.hk.as.criteo.com/delivery/ckn.php?

cppv=3&cpp=3C5k66G5okE3V2ayT6bdli36_jvsgRGhLRvaeHzimgY3lrar9hNXnPM6SU5pWgkSjpDP13zd_BjQQEMq17SgWe4KRN5D94eaO8M6FpN1h25zNBNmNmWV6IAK-520lrx8u11REuqa4AZDKimSYbAWn0LRBXaXwGEN1hVF_f3zTq0r7LhcZpeyB4FJId3VTINyUPHkiNbbFJUnaC63nBlQWPIGacY4tDvY7CvkRw3PFnMid64zHx_nyDDURGcr4RhsX7vbVjsKI1oBC-wMZXxy96TYXM6LD1bGmq8NgrkStz4G9rcXBVD19Ur5gKk_-

NZHOaYaoS6Xh7GN5O4&maxdest=https%3A%2F%2Frealstate.yahoo.co.jp%2Frent%2Fdetail%2F00000132199142be683add7af787798053e5346a1954%2F%3Fult_out%3Ddm_PpO2nq8dE#tblciGiDzYHR49UmBSKqBbVgCHyMMEimmo4VYVcw24IK9jGMekiDwjE4o0s-PpO2nq8dE)

(https://dahlialia.com/sirosae-07-t01?

utm_source=taboola&utm_medium=referral&tblci=GiDzYHR49UmBSKqBbVgCHyMMEimmo4VYVcw24IK9jGMekiCvsk4o1Kzt72mh8y-AQ#tblciGiDzYHR49UmBSKqBbVgCHyMMEimmo4VYVcw24IK9jGMekiCvsk4o1Kzt72mh8y-AQ)

化粧品業界が悲鳴！顔のシミは大正製薬のジェルであっさり？

(:SPONSORED BY (HTTPS://POPOP.TABOOLA.COM/EN/?TEMPLATE=COLORBOX&UTM_SOURCE=JAPANTIMES&UTM_MEDIUM=REFERRAL&UTM_CONT (https://dahlialia.com/sirosae-07-t01?

utm_source=taboola&utm_medium=referral&tblci=GiDzYHR49UmBSKqBbVgCHyMMEimmo4VYVcw24IK9jGMekiCvsk4o1Kzt72mh8y-AQ#tblciGiDzYHR49UmBSKqBbVgCHyMMEimmo4VYVcw24IK9jGMekiCvsk4o1Kzt72mh8y-AQ)